

Chapter Seven

The Old Testament in His Preaching

Historic religions of great worth to men have created their sacred literatures. To these sacred writings appeal has been made to enforce acceptance and obedience to creed and cult. The science of comparative religions has in modern times called attention to these sacred books as the basis for comparison of the relative values of these religions. Such study has brought to clear view a great variety of religious systems, that range from the crude story of the effort of the savage to attain to something beyond himself through incantation on to the highest expressions of ethics and worship.

The Old Testament, the sacred literature of Hebrews, holds the chief place in the library of religions. It was written upon the assumption that Jehovah was speaking through his prophets to give his chosen people needed messages. Varied in authorship and dates of composition, manifold in emphasis upon the duties that come with the worship of Jehovah, uniform in recognition of the divine origin and authority for the message, and different in literary forms and excellence, the Old Testament books were gradually gathered into one collection, or canon, which had reached completion and had attained universal Hebrew acceptance before the times of Jesus. This new Preacher would be expected to give some notice to this sacred canon, either to accept its teachings or to add other standards for faith. Jesus had a vital interest in his Bible. His preaching well manifests that interest.

I. Jesus the Student of the Old Testament

1. How he learned it.—Jesus learned the Old Testament in the home, the village school, and the synagogue. Religious instruction formed an essential part of the education of a Hebrew youth. Portions of the Scriptures were memorized. The village school gave emphasis to the national religious ideals, for the Hebrews could never entirely escape the thought that Jehovah had a real part in their history and destiny. The Scriptures were read and expounded in the synagogues, and Jesus early formed the habit of regular attendance upon these services. The surprise that Jesus created in his own local synagogue was not that he participated in the worship, but that he was so gifted with new meanings and methods concerning the Book. He became acquainted with his Hebrew Bible in his boyhood and largely learned it by the instruction from his mother.



2. The text.—Jesus was acquainted with the two current forms of the text of the

Old Testament, the original Hebrew and the *Greek translation* (Septuagint) which had been made between 250 B.C. and 150 B.C. Jesus used the Hebrew copy in his conduct of the synagogue worship, though only one record of his reading this remains to us. His quotations and general verbal use included both the Hebrew and the Greek.

3. Its inspiration.—Jesus as the student of the Old Testament would have relation to the question of the inspiration of the Old Testament, though this question belongs to modern times. The Old Testament does not define its own inspiration but everywhere assumes what one means by such a term. Theories and definitions are the product of comparatively recent thought, and though discussions have been prolific there is yet lacking a satisfactory definition of the term both as to fact and method.

However, certain fundamentals must be accepted. Inspiration and revelation are not identical. Confusion and interchange of these terms have resulted in criticism that has been unjust, *inane* (lacking sense, silly), and radical. Revelation bestows and authorizes truth; the special truth may be beyond the unaided reason of man to conceive, or a historical fact or experience that God raises to divine authority and relations. Inspiration guarantees the proper selection of materials for a canon of Scriptures and provides for the faithful literary record of such selections. The union of revelation and inspiration assures the Scriptures as the Word of God.

Many efforts have been made to show that the Hebrew prophets were only moved by the same poetical impulse that flowered also in Shakespeare, Dante, Homer, Milton, and other immortals gifted with vision and rhythm. The claim is put forward for equality of method and degree for all these. Lovers of poetry have even claimed for favorite writers more inspiration than for Proverbs or Esther.

One needs to remember the distinction between revelation and inspiration. The psychology of men is yet in primer days, nor is it yet known fully how one mind influences another. The psychology of divine influence has not yet yielded more than interesting problems and difficulties: the laws await the future for their statement. *Dogmatism* (asserting that one's personal opinions are true) in this study of inspiration has been quite easy but wholly out of place. It may possibly be true that every noble and beautiful thought has the immediate direction of God for the individual appropriation and statement, but it will be a far day before the sin-burdened soul will turn to the shelf of the poets in preference to the Bible. The poets' corner will do for the moments of ease and enjoyment, but when men are in the throes of sin or trouble they look beyond poesy. No poet has yet added his volume to the sacred canon.

But the Hebrew prophets claimed for their messages both in initiative and imperative a "thus says Jehovah." The consciousness that Jehovah was speaking through him in oral and written address gave to the prophet more than ordinary dignity and value. His was the Word of God. This presence of Jehovah in the message made it accurate, directive for conduct, and inspirational, whether the method were the gifted minstrelsy of psalmists, the prophetic call to national and personal righteousness, the confession of the penitent, or legislation for the elect

nation. God behind the thought gave it value as his Word. The books of the Old Testament are far removed from books of human authorship. Whether in degree or in kind, their inspiration lifts them into the clouds to where others may not follow.

Jesus accepted and used the Old Testament upon the belief in its real inspiration. Scholars are generally agreed that Jesus had this attitude. The extreme radical declares that Jesus simply shared the delusion of his times, the people being mistaken in their ideas of inspiration. The conservative critic maintains that Jesus was not in error in this belief and that he was competent to pass upon the belief whether these books had abiding value for religion.

Should the position of Jesus become the norm for the present attitude toward the Scriptures? Again the answers group in opposing sides. One man disregards the course of Jesus, thinking that no personal obligation comes to him for similarity of attitude. Another will accept the attitude of Jesus as final for Christian thought, believing that Jesus' use of the authorship, interpretation, and inspiration of the Old Testament was true. The sanity of the Preacher compares favorably with that of the dissectors of verses.

4. A factor in spiritual life.—It would be difficult to overestimate the formative force of the Old Testament in the spiritual life of Jesus.

Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804-1864) tells of the tradition in a little village that some day there would come a man to fulfill the likeness to the Great Stone Face upon the near-by mountain. Claimants for the honor came and were received only to prove themselves failures. A lad in the village had kept daily "communings" with the Face, and after many years was acknowledged the rightful likeness. Through the years he had unconsciously been transformed by his ideal.

Jesus kept company with the Hebrew heroes of old. As he grew in favor with God and men, his thoughts turned more and more toward the national hero of the future, the Messiah; his ideals were fashioned according to the best Hebrew models; and his heart sang the songs of the sweet singers of his people. His unconscious use of the phraseology of the Old Testament during his ministry shows the depth and spirit with which he read his Bible. He was steeped in its language. His spiritual biography would be inexplicable without this sacred book, and we can only glimpse the high peaks in his inner life. How often he must have compared his own experiences with the prophetic delineations of what the Messiah would do and be!

II. Jesus the Interpreter of the Old Testament

1. His attitude toward current method.—Traditionalism had grasped the current scholarship in matters of interpretation. Previous to the times of Jesus various prominent teachers had been able to attract to themselves such influence and following as to form real schools of interpretation, which differed among themselves as to results but agreed in producing a traditional standard. The voice of the prophet had not been heard for four centuries, the Scriptures were in the ancient Hebrew language, while the people spoke Aramaic and Greek; the need for

official interpreters was evident.

These men, who arose gradually to prominence, were called teachers, scribes, doctors, and rabbis. Individual investigation was neither desired nor expected. The method consisted in *conning* (to study with intent to fix to memory) the opinions of dead scholars. Age brought special honor to an interpretation. Originality and freshness were unknown. This regard for the past exalted the rabbinical material into the place that rightly belonged to the sacred text, for in cases of variation or doubt, the text was displaced by the explanation. (Editor's note: Was this not their making intellectual "saints" from among their forefathers?) To traditionalism was joined literalism. The letter of the Word was more important than the spirit. Therefrom developed an undue regard for the externals and ceremonials of religion, which had the form but not the power of goodness.

The method of Jesus was radically different. He departed from traditionalism and externalism. He was original and spiritual in his methods. So pronounced was this new method that the people declared that he taught as one with authority and not as their scribes. The opinions of dead rabbis did not interest him, for he had a fresh, original, and direct vision into the Word. He felt no restraint in his use of the Scriptures nor did he feel impressed to call to his support the current *effete* (over-refined, affected) interpretations. He dared to suggest that he had the right to think for himself upon the meaning of the revelation of his Father. He undertook to reform the current idea of truth as based upon the Scriptures.

2. Its general ideas.—Jesus interpreted the general ideas of the Old Testament in a spiritual and anticipative method of revelation. He considered that the spiritual attitude should give value to the ceremonial part of religion. This new idea startled his critics. They were accustomed to the almost infinite details of the legal side of religion, but Jesus summarized the law under his double command to love God and men. In his view the ancient system of sacrifice was to typify the death of the Lamb of God. History had been preparatory to the incarnation. The chosen people were to make ready for that larger Israel which should know no race limits, being outlined by fellowship with Jesus himself.

3. Its special passages.—A few examples of Jesus' new interpretations may be cited from the long list. His authority and originality in interpretations will thus appear. He extends the prohibition of murder, translating the guilt from the act into the spirit, intense hatred without cause being murder. He exalts and spiritualizes the law of purity, the lustful desire becoming as blameworthy as the act of adultery. (Editor's note: We see that his personal life "without sin" was of a higher standard than that of his day!) The law of retaliation is changed into the law of non-resistance.

III. Jesus the Preacher of the Old Testament

1. Not expository.—Jesus was not an expository preacher. Popular thought so classes him, but incorrectly so. He was a Scriptural preacher in the sense that he often referred to the Scriptures, but he did not give extended *exegesis* (critical explanation or interpretation of a text) of the Old Testament. He often preached in the synagogues, and may have often read the selected passage for the day's

worship, though there is but one record of his reading thus. He rarely quoted a long verse, while his use was more textual and incidental than exegetical.

2. His method of quotation.—The list of Jesus' quotations from the Old Testament will vary with scholars according to length, directness, and simplicity of the quotations. The list prepared for this book cites 34 passages in the Gospels, parallels counting as one. Notwithstanding the efforts of the religious leaders to attract the people's attention to the rabbinical opinions, there was a deep hungering for the Word itself. Jesus invited the people back to the sources. The sacredness of the Book was to be recognized. The people were eager for this fresh touch with the Scriptures. Jesus respected his position as interpreter of the Word and gave notice to the audience that he was making a direct quotation. In all but five examples of direct quotations he used some sign of quotation—"it is written" (10 times), "it is said" (11), "have read" (5), "reads" (1), "fulfilled" (1).

His method of quoting was fragmentary and composite. He did not quote long passages. He made sword thrusts with pointed verses. He often combined original passages into one statement. His homiletical purpose did not require citation of the complete thought of the writer. He chose his passages for wisdom in application rather than for literary ends.

The intention to make a direct quotation on Jesus' part has been the principle of selection in our list of passages. Mere similarity or even sameness in words, where there seemed not to be any design of quoting, would not justify naming a passage as a quotation. Our list of 46 original texts has been chosen upon this theory. In this list 12 examples agree with both the current Hebrew and the Greek texts; 3 follow the Hebrew and 5 the Greek; the others vary more or less both from the Hebrew and the Greek.

Jesus turned with special delight to certain favorites for his quotations. Deuteronomy contained the Law, which was fundamental to the life and religion of his own people; Jesus gave the spiritual significance and fulfillment to this Law, his references to the book being natural. His favorite prophecy was Isaiah, which gave the clearest appreciation of the future Messiah, his humiliation, sufferings, and glory having definite portrayal. This, Jesus continues to explain as the Risen Lord. The evangelical prophet was a kindred spirit to Jesus. Jesus turned to the Psalms for the reflection of his own experiences; these inspired outbursts of poetry had served as the national hymnal and Jesus had early learned their spiritual dynamics. It is not strange that the Fourth Gospel should have limited its quotations in the words of Jesus to those from Isaiah and the Psalms.

The list and frequency of quotations from the Old Testament books may be given thus: Genesis, 2; Exodus, 7; Leviticus, 4; Numbers, 1; Deuteronomy, 14; Psalms, 7; Isaiah, 6; Jeremiah, 1; Hosea, 2; Zechariah, 1; Malachi, 1. The three chief divisions of the Scriptures, the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings, were all represented in these quotations.

Jesus referred to historical events, laws, and customs of the Old Testament without intending to quote them. Here may be noticed his mention of the brazen serpent,

Elijah and the widow of Zarephath, Elijah and Naaman, the law for cleansed lepers, David and the showbread, the priests guiltless of profaning the Temple, Sodom destroyed, Jonah and the fish, Nineveh's repentance under Jonah, the visit of the queen of Sheba to Solomon, the blood of Abel, the blood of Zachariah, Lot's wife, Moses and the burning bush, Noah and the Deluge. These references number 23, of which 5 are repeated; they were used by Jesus in discourses and fragmentary sayings on 13 occasions.

(Editor's note: From the Appendix in this book, here is a chronological listing of Jesus' Old Testament references: Deut. 8:3, Deut. 6:16, Deut. 6:13, Is. 61:1-2, Hos. 6:6, Ex. 20:13, Deut. 5:17, Ex. 20:14, Deut. 5:18, Deut. 24:1, Lev. 19:12, Numb. 30:2, Deut. 23:21, Ex. 21:24; Lev. 24:20, Deut. 19:21, Deut. 23:6, Deut. 25:19, Lev.19:18, Mal. 3:1, Is. 6:9-10, Is. 54:13, Ex. 20:12, Deut. 5:16, Ex. 21:17, Deut. 20:9, Is. 29:13, Ps. 82:6, Gen. 1:27, Gen. 2:24, Ex. 20:12-16, Deut. 5:16-20, Is. 56:7, Jer. 7:11, Ps. 8:2, Ps. 118:22-23, Ex. 3:6, Deut. 6:4-5, Lev. 19:18, Ps. 110:1, Ps 41:9, Zech. 13:7, Is. 53:12, Ps. 35:19, and Ps. 69:4.)

The words of Jesus were filled with the spirit and the phraseology of the Old Testament even in cases without direct quotations. The list of such echoes and similarities could be almost indefinitely enlarged.

3. Honor for his Bible.—Great reverence for his Bible was always shown by Jesus. He did not excuse the sins of his people, whose historic deeds were recorded here, and yet he could recognize the hand of God in the national history and organizations. The prophets had come to correct the errors of the people. Jesus believed in their divine calling and service, for God was speaking through them to prepare the nation for their Messiah. He did not undervalue the office of the prophet nor did he question the real authority of the Old Testament for the times. He believed that Israel would have accomplished its mission if it had followed the guidance of its true leaders. To Jesus the Old Testament was God's truth expressed for people of those times.

4. Polemical use.—The Old Testament served the *polemical* (disputed, controversial debate) purposes of Jesus. He met the charge of disregard for the traditions with the story of David and the bread used only by the priests. The current piety of formalism he rebuked with the real spiritual message of the Book. The leaders had covered up the truth. He quoted the Scriptures in his initial temptations by Satan.

5. The equality of his words.—Jesus claimed for his own words an equality in authority with the Old Testament. He believed in the divine origin of the Book, and yet dared to put his own words upon the same basis as claiming the right to direct faith and conduct. In his own message God was speaking as he had done through older prophets. His consciousness of this fact compelled his ministry to sound the fearless note of authority. To such claims for recognition as the voice of God he added the testimony of miracles and of a holy life. The canon of the Scriptures had been chosen for so long a time that the people did not readily desire additions.

6. Its permanent value.—The Old Testament will continue to hold permanent value for men since Jesus saw its proper place in the religious life of his day. He had

come to conserve all the permanent elements of religion that had found place on the Old Testament. Its historical portions will continue to illustrate God's providential care for the world, its ethical laws will remain binding, its ceremonials will make more glorious the simplicity of the sacrifice once for all made by Christ, its poetry and psalmody will never lose power to charm and comfort men. Jesus made the Old Testament a source of spiritual power to his own experience. The ministry of other days may well follow his example.

(End of Chapter Seven – The Old Testament in His Preaching)