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The Importance of the Old Testament for the Church

J. J. M. Roberts

The emphasis in the Restoration tradition on "rightly dividing the Word," on recognizing the different dispensations reflected in scripture, on seeing a clear distinction between the old and new covenant was a correct and important insight, but even correct insights drag in their wake unintended, incorrect, and harmful consequences. In the Restoration tradition the emphasis on being under the new covenant has led to a serious neglect and even disparagement of the Old Testament as of no relevance for modern believers. Patently false dichotomies between Law in the Old Testament versus Grace in the New, a God of Wrath in the Old Testament versus a God of Love in the New Testament, harsh punishment in the Old Testament versus forgiveness in the New, etc., have been widely passed off as true largely because the Old Testament has been little read and seldom seriously studied in our tradition. One does not need to listen long in a typical Bible class to hear such negative, uninformed stereotypes about the Old Testament scriptures, and it is not unusual to hear the complaint that classes on an Old Testament book or sermons on an Old Testament text are a waste of time. After all, as New Testament Christians, of what relevance is the Old Testament to our lives?

Such a negative and disparaging view of the Old Testament did not originate with the Restoration tradition. It has a long and sad history in the Christian church. Almost from the beginning there were Christian teachers who were offended by the Old Testament and who played down its impor-

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tance for Christian believers. Yet, despite all its shortcomings, the great church rejected the most outspoken of these teachers as heretics. One of the earliest and best known of these heretics was Marcion, who died around 160 A.D.[1] He was a wealthy ship owner from Sinope in Pontus, who moved to Rome around 140 A.D. He was the son of a bishop who had excommunicated him, supposedly on the grounds of immorality, but nonetheless he joined the orthodox church in Rome where he worked out his theological system and began to organize his followers as a separate community. He was officially excommunicated as a heretic in 144 A.D., but he continued to organize his communities over a large part of the empire, and these Marcionites were a major doctrinal threat to the church throughout the last half of the second century.

Marcion argued that the Christian message was a Gospel of Love to the exclusion of Law, and therefore he totally rejected the Old Testament. According to Marcion, the God of the Old Testament and creator of the physical world was a demiurge, not the true God and father of Jesus Christ. This Jewish God, as revealed in the Old Testament, was capricious, ignorant, despotic, and cruel. Jesus came to reveal the good God of Love and overthrow the demiurge of the Old Testament. Of the New Testament writers, only Paul understood the truth completely, so Marcion's canon was limited to ten heavily edited epistles of Paul and a severely edited recension of the Gospel of Luke. The rest of the New Testament was rejected as corrupted by Jewish influence.

Marcionism gained most of its converts from the great church, not from Paganism, and it lived by conversion, since marriage and sexual inter-

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[1] "Marcion," in the *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, F. L. Cross and E. A. Livingston, eds. (3rd ed.; Oxford University Press, 1997), 1033-1034.

course, mired as they were in the filth and obscenity of the physical world created by the demiurge, were strictly prohibited. This inherent animosity to the physical world left Marcionism susceptible to dualistic tendencies in Gnosticism. By the end of the third or beginning of the fourth century, most of the Marcionite communities in the West had been absorbed into the Manichean heresy.[2] It continued longer in the East, but under pressure from both the great church and Manichaeanism, Marcionism eventually died out there as well.

In more recent times, a similar rejection of the Old Testament was seriously proposed by German adherents of classical liberal Christianity. The distinguished church historian, Adolph von Harnack, argued that in Marcion's time the church was right in rejecting Marcion's views, and in the time of the Reformation it was not possible to dismiss the Old Testament, but that for Protestantism to retain the Old Testament in its canon in the late nineteenth century was a result of religious and ecclesiastical paralysis.[3] Harnack's major historical treatment of Marcion had portrayed Marcion as the precursor of classical liberal Christianity, so the explicit anti-Semitism of Marcion's views was at least implicit in Harnack's view of the essence of Christianity. He argued that the Old Testament should be removed from the Christian canon because one cannot perceive from it what is Christian, yet

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[2] "Mani (or Manes) and Manichaeism," in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 1027–1028.

[3] Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Geschichte der historisch-kritischen Erforschung des Alten Testaments* (2nd ed.; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1969), 386. Adolf von Harnack, *Marcion: The Gospel of the Alien God (*John E. Steely and Lyle D. Biuerma, trans.; Durham: Labyrinth, 1990), 134. For the full text of the appendices it is necessary to go to the German edition, *Marcion, Das Evangelium vom fremden Gott: Eine Monographie zur Geschichte der grundlegung der katholicichen Kirche.* (Leipzig: schaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1996).

this removal from the canon would not be a rejection, since once removed from the Christian canon, the Old Testament would everywhere be esteemed and treasured in its distinctiveness.[4] Harnack's own view of the Old Testament was hardly one of "esteem," however, so his argument seems disingenuous. Moreover, his theological hostility to the Old Testament was taken up by a significant portion of German Old Testament scholarship, providing ready-made weapons for the anti-Semitism of the Third Reich.[5]

Because many leading representatives of the "German Christians" bought into the same views, it is not surprising that by and large the German church failed to protest the rabid anti-Semitism of the Third Reich. Dismiss the Old Testament, and before long Jesus is no longer a Jew, but a good Aryan, and the Jews are seen as nothing but a hindrance and a threat to the development of pure Aryan Christianity. There is no question that the new Marcionism of the "German Christians" removed the restraints of real history and paved the way for the horrible atrocities committed against the Jews.

Few Christians today would take as extreme a negative view of the Old Testament as Marcion, Harnack, or the Nazis, but one need not officially and explicitly decanonize the Old Testament in order to achieve practically the same effect. A relatively benign neglect of the Old Testament in the church can accomplish much the same purpose without provoking as strong a counter-reaction. Nor does one need to look far to see such benign neglect. It is endemic in our churches and hardly less pervasive in most other American denominations.

This is evident even to a casual observer by the relative infrequency with which our weekly sermons are based on Old Testament texts. Even on

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[4] Harnack, *Marcion*, 138.

[5] Harnack, *Marcion*, 432.

those infrequent occasions when an Old Testament text is the purported basis of the sermon, one often finds that the text is a pretext to jump to some New Testament passage. Preachers seldom take the time to exegete the Old Testament text in its own context and to explore what that text might have to contribute to contemporary Christian reflection. Instead one moves precipitously to a supposedly related New Testament text, with which the preacher feels more comfortable, in order to extricate the theological message of an Old Testament text. The result is that the Old Testament text is cited and then ignored, or worse, treated as a negative foil, while exegetical and theological reflection is actually based on the "related" New Testament text.

It is true that most of our preachers and many of our members would claim that one cannot understand the New Testament without the Old, but this claim has little bearing on the point being discussed. As usually stated, the claim simply acknowledges the historical priority of the Old Testament and its literary influence on the themes and motifs taken up in the New Testament. Just as a literary knowledge of the Bible is helpful in understanding English literature, so a literary knowledge of the Old Testament is helpful in understanding the New Testament. Often this claim is joined with a treatment of the Old Testament abstracted from the book of Hebrews in which the Old Testament provides the type or the shadow, while the New Testament provides the substance, the reality only foreshadowed in the Old. Such a view is not congenial to allowing an Old Testament text an independent voice. Yet it is precisely such an independent theological voice for which I am arguing. If the Old Testament has canonical status, the modern Christian should be able to take the theological claims of its texts as grist for theological reflection without first filtering them through New Testament lenses.

That is not to suggest that the preacher or church member should pre-

tend to be an ancient Israelite when reading the Old Testament. I am a Christian, and I should never forget the good news of the Gospel, not even when reading or preaching from the Old Testament. Nevertheless, that should not prevent me from hearing an earlier text in its own integrity. After all, the Old Testament was the Bible of the church before the New Testament was written, and Paul claims that the things written there "were written down to instruct us, on whom the end of the ages has come" (1 Cor 10:11). One can attempt to understand an ancient text in its own historical, political, theological, and cultural context, while at the same time, in the light of the Gospel, reflecting on the relevance of that text for contemporary Christian life. It requires some effort, but such effort will be repaid by a depth of insight that only such disciplined reflection can provide.

Perhaps it would be useful to cite some concrete ways in which more disciplined reflection on the Old Testament would be helpful to modern Christian thought. One such advantage would be to protect the church from "over-spiritualizing" the Gospel and the life of the Christian disciple. There is a very strong tendency in our churches to reduce salvation to "saving souls" from eternal damnation and to focus almost exclusively on "forgiveness of sins." The more "earthly" aspects of salvation as portrayed in the Old Testament—deliverance from political oppression, just and fair government, physical and economic well-being, freedom for abundant and joyous living within functional family units and larger community structures—are largely ignored as irrelevant for the evangelistic task of the church.

Such spiritualization cannot be justified even from the New Testament. Jesus healed the sick as well as forgiving sinners. According to John, he came that his people "might have life, and have it abundantly" (John 10:11). The early church was concerned with helping its poor economically

(Acts 7:34–35; 6:1–7; Gal 2:9–10; 1 Cor 16:1–4; 2 Cor 8–9; 1 Tim 6:17–19) and with treating them with dignity and impartiality (James 2:1–9), not just with saving their souls. The recurring Old Testament emphasis on an active concern for the poor, the widow, the orphan, and the stranger is a helpful reminder to overly "spiritual" Christians that the quality of life in this world, in the here and now, cannot be ignored without threatening the quality of the life to come.

The Old Testament's emphasis on the physicality of the present world is also a healthy corrective to the religious disparagement of physical reality. Ecclesiastes stresses the importance of humans enjoying life in the here and now with the everyday pleasures God has provided—with food and drink, cosmetics and clothes, human companionship and meaningful labor (Eccl 2:24–25; 3:12–13; 6:18–20; 9:7–10). The Song of Songs' celebration of human sexuality should remind us that sex is a gift of God to be received and enjoyed, within the appropriate context, with thanksgiving (Heb 13:4). Food and drink, including meat and wine, are treated by scripture as the gift of God to be received with thanksgiving. The Old Testament speaks of wine as "cheering both gods and humans" (Judg 9:14), and it includes both rich, marrow-filled meat and well-aged wine in its portrayal of God's future banquet for all people on Mt. Zion (Isa 25:6). Jesus' first miracle was to turn water into wine (John 2:1–11), and his opponents accused him of being a glutton and drunkard (Matt 11:19; Luke 7:34). This is a charge that would be hard to understand had Jesus lived among them as a teetotaler vegetarian. It is worth reminding those Christians who want to impose on other Christians a religiously motivated demand for sexual abstinence, vegetarianism, or abstinence from all alcoholic beverages, that these were the demands of the ancient Christian heretics, not of Jesus and his apostles (1 Tim 4:1–5; Heb

13:9).

This Old Testament emphasis on the enjoyment and experience of the full dimensions of human life now could also be an antidote to a very one-sided portrayal of discipleship that sometimes arises from the new theological emphasis on "missional" churches. Whatever the broader theological intent behind this movement, it has sometimes come to focus almost exclusively on the disciple's obligation to share his or her faith with others. One might get the impression that the whole of the Christian life could be reduced to making converts. Moreover, such a distortion would appear to erase the New Testament distinctions between evangelists, preachers, teachers, and ordinary members—everyone is to do the work of an evangelist and bring others to Christ. Not only does this ignore what the New Testament says about the varieties of gifts in the church, it ignores what the New Testament also says about the life of discipleship. If one looks at the letters of Paul and the other epistles written to the churches, one can only be struck by the disconnect between the canonical instructions given to the churches and this modern fixation on evangelism in the "missional" church movement. The New Testament epistles have relatively little to say about the need of the average church members to be converting their neighbors; they have far more to say about the way the church members are to live their lives. That might suggest that relevant preaching for the church should focus more on how its members should live a life of genuine discipleship in all its fulness, rather than confusing their task with that of the evangelist.

Finally, one should note an inherent limitation of the New Testament witness that could be alleviated by attention to the larger canon. All of the New Testament documents were written in a relatively short time span—at the most from about 50–150 A.D., and probably in an even more compressed

period. Moreover, the communities that produced these writings were all minority communities without significant political power within societies dominated politically, culturally, and economically by other groups. The same is also true of Jesus and the apostles about whom writers in these Christian communities wrote. Neither the founders of Christianity nor its adherents during the composition of the New Testament occupied positions of power. Moreover, the political organization of the state during this period did not allow ordinary citizens any significant influence over state policies.

Thus the New Testament witness provides very good instruction for Christian communities that exist under similar political and cultural constraints. One may question how adequately it addresses the questions that arise for Christian communities who find themselves in positions of power and responsible for the governance of larger political communities

The issue of a Christian's attitude toward coercive power as exercised by a legitimate government for the protection of its people is one issue that arises in this context. Here, the witness of the Old Testament canon can assist the Christian in his or her reflections over Christian duty within a radically different political setting. Unlike that of the New Testament, the composition of the Old Testament extended over a period of a thousand years, and during a portion of this period the communities that produced these writings were not only politically independent, but sometimes even dominant over surrounding vassal states and thus responsible for a broader rule. Their context, as different as it may be, is certainly more analogous to that of the modern Christian living in the United States or Europe than the politically powerless context of the New Testament Christian under the *Pax Romana*. Thus the relevance of the Old Testament witness for modern Western Christians, struggling with political issues regarding the use of governmental

power, cannot be overemphasized.

This has obvious significance for the contemporary Christian debate on the appropriateness of a thoroughgoing pacifism as the only legitimate position with regard to legitimate use of coercive power. The repeated Old Testament demand for just rulers, who, by lethal force if necessary, will prevent the strong from oppressing the weak, is so damaging to the argument of pacifists like the contemporary Christian ethicist Stanley Hauerwas that he effectively dismisses the Old Testament as thoroughly as Marcion did. He does so by reading the Old Testament through the lenses of a select group of New Testament texts. Hauerwas never seriously considers the contexts of his select texts as the witness of a minority group, dominated by foreign powers, with extremely limited freedom of political action.[6]

Moreover, to maintain his views, he must ignore other New Testament texts that seem to admit the legitimacy of coercive power as exercised by the state. In the gospel of Luke for instance, when soldiers come to John the Baptist asking them what they should do to live out their repentance, John does not demand they resign from the military nor does he urge them not to take part in battle. He says, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages" (Luke 3:14). Paul's admonition to the Christian communities to be subject to the governing political authorities also recognizes the legitimacy of coercive governmental power (Rom 13:1-7). He even says, "But if you do what is wrong,

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[6]These reflections arise out of exchanges that took place in a panel discussion sponsored by the "Character Ethics and Biblical Interpretation Group" at the SBL annual meeting in Toronto in 2002, in which Professor Hauerwas and this writer were participants. Cf. my "The End of the War in the Zion Tradition: The Imperialistic Background of an Old Testament Vision of World Peace," *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 26 (2004): 2–22.

you should be afraid, for the authority does not bear the sword in vain! It is the servant of God to execute wrath on the wrongdoer" (Rom 13:4). To ignore the historical, political, and cultural contexts of the key pacifistic texts, to read the contradictory Old Testament texts only through the lenses of these highly selected New Testament proof texts, and to dismiss other New Testament texts that relativize the pacifistic interpretation of these selective texts, hardly differs in character from Marcion's similar reduction of the canon.

A church that wants to be a faithful witness in the real world, the world created by the triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—needs the whole canon of scripture, the Old Testament as well as the New. The Old Testament remains a safeguard and a defense against those readings of the New Testament that would overspiritualize it, disparage the physical realities of our lives, and reduce the complexity of Christian existence to a single imperative—whether to witness to others or not to resist evil. The whole canon is like a treasure from which the Christian disciple brings forth both what is old and what is new (cf. Matt 13:52) as the actual context of his or her life calls for it. It would be the height of folly for the church either intentionally or unintentionally to throw away the greater portion of that treasure.

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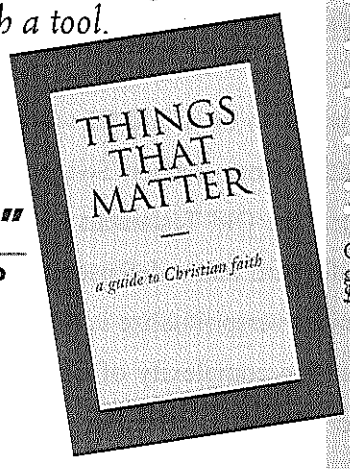

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