

THE PREACHER NEEDS TO KNOW THE OLD TESTAMENT*

By Jack P. Lewis

A church cut loose from the Old Testament is a tree with its tap root cut. God's revelation is a revelation through the means of history; it is not a revelation of timeless truths alone. In the Old Testament the problems are set which are resolved in the New Testament; namely, the fall of man, sin, and redemption. Only in terms of the Old Testament can it be understood what God accomplished in the sending of his son into the world. Were the echoes and allusions to the Old Testament cut out of the New Testament, the blanks would leave the remainder too spotty to read. The New Testament writers assumed that the reader would have sufficient knowledge of the Old Testament to grasp immediately the allusions made to it. Concepts like covenant, messiah, atonement, Son of Man, Son of David, chosen race, pastor, and others, have no clear meaning apart from their Old Testament background. An abundance of lesser concepts also have their roots there.

The moral lessons of the Old Testament are eternal in their value. There one can see clothed in human form the warnings and the precepts elsewhere taught. He meets Cain asking, "Am I my brother's keeper?", Lot pitching his tent toward Sodom, Potiphar's wife chasing Joseph, Baalam loving the hire of wrongdoing. David committing adultery with his neighbor's wife. Solomon climbing the ladder of success until his heart is turned from God, and Ahab coveting Naboth's vineyard. But he also meets Abraham leaving his father's house to walk by faith. Moses turning his back on Egypt's riches. Elijah defying Jezebel, Micaiah ben Imlah choosing bread and water as fare in preference to reward for flattering the king, and Daniel's refusing the king's dainties. The man who does not regularly draw from the riches of the Old Testament has impoverished his preaching. How much richer are the treasures here to be found than are the platitudes of psychology and sociology! Let us not forsake the fountain of living waters and turn to broken cisterns that can hold no water (cf. Jer. 2:13).

In the Old Testament one sees how God in order to save the world chose one family, nurtured, protected, and favored it in order that he might finally save those of faith of the entire human race. The Stoics thought of history moving in circles; Shakespeare speaks of life as being a stage full of sound and fury, but meaning nothing; but history in the Old Testament has meaning. God is working out a plan. The world is moving steadily and inevitable to a goal – its destiny with God.

The outpouring of the religious impulse revealed in the Psalms is priceless. Here in lyric poetry is laid bare the longings of the soul. Man has never more forcefully stated the torment of the guilty conscience and the relief brought by genuine repentance than is done in Psalms 51 and 32; awareness of the brevity of life than in Psalm 110; and the beauty of harmony than in Psalm 133. The mold broke when the Psalmists expressed trust in God in words of Psalm 23. None has ever been able to express it that way again. As long as men wander like sheep and find in God their

shepherd it will have an appeal. Compared with these and other Old Testament treasures rock poetry and music are poor indeed! Long after they have been forgotten as passing human curiosities, men who put forth the effort to know them will still be thrilling to the themes of the Psalms.

The Hebrew prophets when persistently studied contain rich veins of ore out of which the diligent preacher can mine gold week after week, year after year. Where in all literature could you surpass the convicting power of Nathan's story of the one lamb; Isaiah's song of the vineyard, or Jeremiah's story of the potter remaking the broken clay into another vessel? Who has surpassed Amos' description of opportunity and responsibility (Amos 3:1); Micah's summary of the essence of God's demands (Micah 6:8); Hosea's picture of the love of God (Hosea 11:1ff); Zephaniah's picture of the Day of the Lord (Zeph. 1:14ff.); or Habakkuk's statement of unconditional faith (Hab. 3:17)? The prophets do not yield gold easily. It takes diligent digging, but the reward is high. I have listened to men try to preach who took their themes from children's books or from current magazines. My heart saddened for it seemed to me that they had traded their birthright for a mess of pottage.

A popular concept in the study of Old Testament theology is that of recital. The Old Testament is not merely the narration of stories or the narration of ancient history. Its narratives are a recital or a confession of faith. Perhaps we meet this concept in action in the frequent Old Testament introduction, "I am the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob." I believe in the God who created man, brought the flood, chose Israel and gave her the land of Palestine. I believe in the God who raised David to the throne, took Israel to Babylon, and then in a unique act restored her to her land. He is the Father of Our Lord Jesus Christ. He is the God I serve.

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