

GOD WHO IS RICH IN MERCY



Essays presented to
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Chapter 14

THE UNITY OF THE OLD AND NEW TESTAMENTS:

As illustrated in the Epistle to The Hebrews

MARCUS L. LOANE

The inspiration and authority of the Bible are the solid bedrock on which all sound theology is bound to rest. The Anglican Articles of Religion state the case as clearly as one could wish: "Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation: so that whatsoever is not read therein nor may be proved thereby is not to be required of any man, that it should be believed as an article of the Faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation." But one does not need to be a theologian in order to affirm the importance and relevance of the Bible in all human affairs.

I cannot help thinking of the early colonial development of New England. Those colonies on the eastern seaboard of the new world had been founded by the Pilgrim Fathers and settled by Puritan immigrants. Their great desire was to establish a society in which the Word of God would form the rule of life. The Universities of Yale and Harvard came into being with the primary object of educating men for the Puritan ministry.

There was a strong moral force which helped to preserve the pattern of social integrity. But this was steadily undermined in the eighteenth century by the growth of liberalism and the rejection of the divine authority of the Bible; and this process came to a head as a result of the Revolution and the War of Independence. Timothy Dwight was to declare that this "unhinged the principles, the morality, and the religion of this country more than could ever have been done by a peace of forty years". Moral and spiritual standards were eroded in a climate of scepticism and unbelief.

The authority and relevance of the Bible has ceased to count in a new age of moral laxity and religious indifference. It can only be through the recovery of that strong sense of the Bible as God's Word for the world today that our national character can be strengthened in

the discipline of true godliness; and in this respect, we must covet for all men what in our moments of noblest aspiration we covet for ourselves.

We must think in terms of the whole Bible rather than of any one part or parts. The OT and NT must stand or fall together; they cannot be adequately interpreted apart from each other. The OT has come down to us in its integrity at the hands of its historical guardians, and we recognize its canonical authority because of the divine sanction of our Lord who quoted its books, and no others, as the Word of God. The NT has come down to us in its totality from the apostolic age, and its text has been confirmed by the superabundant manuscript evidence which has become available.

We owe to the Reformation the great principle that underlies the translation of the Scriptures from the Greek and Hebrew texts into the vernacular speech of ordinary people. This was to make England towards the close of the Elizabethan era what John Richard Green described as "a nation of one book, and that book the Bible". It is the whole Bible, and nothing but the Bible, that those who stand in line with the Masters of the Reformation accept as the supreme standard and the final court of appeal in all matters of doctrine and ethics.

Therefore it is imperative to keep clearly in view the interrelationship and interdependence of the OT and the NT. It is an old saying that the NT is concealed in the Old, and that the OT is revealed in the New. The converging lines of history and prophecy in the OT all point in a single direction; that is, to God's final great self-revelation in the gospel. No two books in the NT are so steeped in the OT as the Epistle to the Hebrews and The Revelation of St John the Divine. This applies to quotation, imagery, historical background, and spiritual precedent. This has led me to choose as the topic for this essay, "The Unity of the Bible as illustrated in the Epistle to the Hebrews".

The words which stand at the head of this Letter set the tone for all that follows: "God, having of old time spoken unto the fathers in the prophets by divers portions and in divers manners, hath at the end of these days spoken unto us in his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things" (Heb 1:1-2). The first step in the self-revelation of God was through the mouth of the prophets. It is GOD who spoke, and he spoke in the OLD TIME; that is, in an age when men were sorely in need of light in their darkness. He spoke to THE FATHERS in the patriarchal dawn of Israel, and he went on speaking through THE PROPHETS in succeeding generations. "He spake by the mouth of his holy prophets which have been since the world began" (Luke 1:70). That self-revelation of God through the prophets was of incomparable

value; but the aorist participle, HAVING SPOKEN, shows that the age of the prophets has now come to an end.

The next stage in God's self-revelation was through his Son. The God who had spoken to the fathers has now spoken to US; that is, to the whole church until the end of time. The prophetic utterance and Mosaic covenant through which God had spoken to the House of Israel have moved to their ultimate fulfilment in the Person of Christ. Great as were the prophets, he is greater; they were frail and sinful, whereas he is the SON. He is God's last word to mankind; that word is final and unique. He came from the bosom of the Father to reveal the Father to men, and no one can know the Father unless it is revealed through him. It was because he is the Son that he could say: "He that hath seen me hath seen the Father" (John 14:9). It was no less true to say that those who heard his words would hear the Father also. God's self-revelation reached the point of finality when his Son came into the world. God HAS SPOKEN, and the aorist tense of the verb marks the decisive character of that revelation; God has no further word for us apart from the word which came through his Son.

The way in which the words spoken through the prophets found their ultimate fulfilment in Christ is well illustrated in the first four chapters of this Letter. If one may judge by the marginal references in the Revised Version, there are no less than twenty-five quotations in these chapters from the Psalms alone. Some are only fleeting verbal echoes; others are the foundation for a major doctrinal argument.

Let me begin with the declaration: "Unto which of the angels said he at any time, Thou art my Son; this day have I begotten thee?" (Heb 1:5; cf. 5:5; Ps 2:7). This title of sonship was used of the angels as a body and of Israel as a nation, but was never applied to an individual in the OT except in the words of this Psalm. The primary reference may have been to Solomon who as David's son was destined to inherit his crown and kingdom. But the verse is quoted no less than three times in the NT as a mystical reference to Christ. St Paul quoted it in his sermon at Antioch of Pisidia in a way that refers the phrase "this day" to the Resurrection: "God hath fulfilled (the promise made unto the fathers) unto our children in that he raised up Jesus; as also it is written in the second psalm, Thou art my Son; this day have I begotten thee" (Acts 13:33). This was quite in accord with his statement elsewhere that God's "Son who was born of the seed of David . . . was declared to be the Son of God with power . . . by the resurrection of the dead" (Rom 1:3-4).

But the author of Hebrews quotes this verse twice as a witness to the fact that God had confirmed the reality of Sonship in the case of

the Lord Jesus by a divine decree. The word order in the Greek text helps to mark the unique nature of this Sonship: "My Son art Thou, and Thou alone; this day, a moment of crisis, have I begotten Thee." That lifts our eyes to the boundless plains of eternity and to Origen's doctrine of his eternal generation. No angel was ever declared to be God's Son in terms like these; and yet, Son though he was, he was made a little lower than the angels that he might taste of death for every man (Heb 2:9).

The next example is a quotation from Psalm 95 which underlies the argument in chapters three and four. "Wherefore," so the initial quotation is introduced, "even as the Holy Ghost saith, To-day, if ye shall hear his voice, harden not your hearts as in the provocation, like as in the day of the temptation in the wilderness" (Heb 3:7-11); cf. Ps 95:7-11). This passage was partly quoted not less than four more times in the following discussion (cf. Heb 3:15; 4:3, 5, 7). The Psalm referred to a historical event based on the conduct of the twelve tribes at the waters of Meribah in the wilderness. They had rebelled when they became frantic with thirst; Moses was provoked to anger by their conduct; and God swore in his wrath that that generation would not enter into the promise of rest in Canaan (Num 20:4-13). This was in the mind of David when he came to utter words of warning to his generation. "To-day," he wrote, "Oh that ye would hear his voice! Harden not your heart, as at Meribah, as in the day of (temptation) in the wilderness . . . Wherefore I swore in my wrath that they should not enter into my rest" (Ps 95:7-11).

But the passage of time had done nothing to alter the validity of that warning, and the author of this letter applied the words of the Psalmist to his readers with that very solemn preface: "Wherefore, even as the Holy Ghost saith" (3:7). He looked beyond David to the Holy Ghost as the real author of this warning. It might have been thought that the verb would be in the past tense; but that is not the case. They were summoned to hear the voice of the Holy Spirit as One who was speaking at that very moment, and who keeps on speaking. David had applied the lesson to the people of his generation. Then the author of this letter recalled his words as a warning by the Holy Ghost to Hebrew converts in the first Christian century. And we who now read that warning are meant beyond all doubt to bring it down to our own age. It is more than the voice of a prophet; it is more than the voice of an angel; it is the voice of God who speaks by means of his Spirit with an authority which no one can ever gainsay.

The third example was a quotation which had special significance for the author's thesis on the priesthood of Christ: "The Lord hath

sworn, and will not repent, Thou art a priest for ever, after the order of Melchizedek" (Ps 110:4). This was quoted, in part or whole, no less than five times (Heb 5:6, 10; 6:20; 7:17; 21). The first instance shows that it was to be the foundation of his argument on the priestly office of Christ. Nothing could have made it clearer that his priesthood was not like that of the sons of Aaron. He was not a member of the tribe of Levi; he came from the house of Judah. And his priesthood was of older standing than theirs; it was "after the order of Melchizedek". Did the author have it in mind to go on at once and speak at length of Melchizedek? (cf. 5:10). It looks like that; instead there was a break before he could pursue that theme because he had "many things to say, and hard of interpretation" (v13). But all the time in the meanwhile, Melchizedek's name stands before our minds and the meaning of that priestly order calls for explanation. It was resumed when the promise made to Abraham and its confirmation by an oath was discussed, and the last words in that passage point to Jesus who has "become a high priest for ever, after the order of Melchizedek" (6:19-20).

The author then addressed himself to the double aspect of his priestly office. He is a priest for ever; his priesthood is after the order of Melchizedek. Who was Melchizedek, and what was his actual connection with Christ? The materials to answer those questions were only two slender references in the OT. His name had been mentioned once in connection with Abraham (Gen 14:18-20) and once in a prophecy concerning the Messiah (Ps 110:4). The narrative in Genesis makes it certain that he was no ordinary person; he was superior to the patriarch who was known as the friend of God. This is not conclusive; but the declaration in this letter that he had neither father nor mother, neither beginning of days nor end of life, and was without human genealogy, is a tacit claim that he was more than earthly being, more than mortal priest; he was none other than the Son of God Himself. An element of mystery was allowed to surround the person of Melchizedek from the outset and it was not relieved until the silence was broken by the Messianic declaration: "The Lord hath sworn, and will not repent, Thou art a priest for ever, after the order of Melchizedek" (Ps 110:4). David did not say who he was, but he referred to his priesthood in a remarkable manner. Melchizedek was not only the priest of the Most High God; his priesthood was timeless: and the Messianic King was ordained with an oath as a priest "for ever", after the order of Melchizedek. It was this fact which the author of this letter represented as the climax of those things which mark Melchizedek as unique; he "abideth a priest continually" (Heb 7:3). The word "continually" is in effect synonymous with the phrase "for ever".

Then the author argued that both Christ and Melchizedek belong to the same order of priesthood; what is true of one is true of the other. Melchizedek must be treated as a priest "for ever"; otherwise Christ could not be treated as a priest "for ever". The whole argument is based on the assertion that the priesthood of Christ is like that of Melchizedek; and that priesthood is "for ever". Melchizedek is seen as one who is, and who remains, a priest; he is just as truly a priest now as in the days of Abraham. It was no mere fellow mortal who appeared to Abraham; it was one "like unto the Son of God" (Heb 7:3). There is only one explanation that accounts for all the facts, and it is that Melchizedek and the Son of God are one in identity. It was because the appearance to Abraham was a Christophany that the author of this letter was able to ascribe a priesthood "for ever" both to Melchizedek and to the Son of God. That is the sole pivot on which the whole case turns, for it was the only issue which the Psalm of David and the divine oath had proposed. The order of Melchizedek transcends the order of Aaron because it is "for ever" but there can not be two priests who are both "for ever". The Son of God Who appeared to Abraham as Melchizedek was made flesh and dwelt among men as Jesus of Nazareth.

Chapter seven marks the watershed in the Epistle to the Hebrews. The whole movement of thought had been concerned with the Person of our high priest and had shown that he is infinitely better than the sons of Aaron. From now on, the movement of thought would be concerned with the office of our high priest and would show how far it transcends all that Aaron's role could ever achieve.

The eighth chapter therefore begins with a verse which sums up all that has gone before, and then goes on to deal with the nature of Christ's work as high priest and the sphere in which that work is performed (Heb 8:1-2). This is in stark contrast with the priestly work of Aaron which was governed by the detailed regulations laid down in Exodus and Leviticus. No high priest of Israel would have ventured to come before God unless he had "somewhat to offer" (8:3); and that "somewhat" was laid down in clear terms by the law of Moses. It was the high priest who had to enter the holy of holies where the ark and mercy seat were situated. He passed through the veil once a year, but not without the blood of a sacrificial victim. He went in to sprinkle that blood on the mercy seat in order to atone for the sins of Israel; only when that was done could he lift up his voice to make intercession for the people (Lev 16:1-28). He brought a gift that he could offer; he had the blood that he could sprinkle; but all this was at best no more than a shadow preparation for a better ministry and a better offering (Heb 8:3-5).

This elaborate OT ritual is the background apart from which little understanding could be formed with regard to the argument in this epistle. Aaron's priesthood was based on the pattern which God gave Moses on Sinai; but the original of that pattern was in heaven and was infinitely superior to the copy: "But now hath he obtained a ministry the more excellent, by how much also he is the mediator of a better covenant, which hath been enacted upon better promises" (Heb 8:6). There was a better ministry; there was a better covenant; and there were better promises.

The march of thought in the next two chapters is steeped in the imagery and symbolism of the OT. The main features of the Hebrew sanctuary are sketched: we see first the outer court which housed the lamp and holy table, then the inner shrine which held the ark and golden censer. The text looks back to the ritual on the day of atonement; it was a grand, but a sombre, system. The special emphasis falls on the fact that the high priest alone could enter the inmost sanctuary, and that he had to do this once a year in order to sprinkle the blood of a sacrificial victim on the mercy seat which covered the ark. But no single entry ever sufficed to leave the way open; the whole procedure had to be repeated on the same day each year (Heb 9:1-10). Repetition was the hallmark of that system; that was its fatal weakness.

But tabernacle and sanctuary, altar and victim, offering and sacrifice, all the recurring ritual that was involved, were in total contrast with the once-for-all sacrifice of our high priest whose work is for ever complete (Heb 9:11-28). Those ancient victims were only required as a symbol of that mysterious Someone who was yet to appear, and the writer quoted once more from a Psalm in order to bring out the voluntary nature of the self-offering he would come to make: "Wherefore, when he cometh into the world, he saith, Sacrifice and offering thou wouldest not, but a body didst thou prepare for me; . . . Then said I, Lo, I am come, in the roll of the book it is written of me, to do thy will, O God" (10:5-7; cf. Ps 40:6-8). It was of Christ that the Psalm had spoken in this prophetic enigma, and his human body was the ultimate offering which the ancient altar was designed to presage. Jesus offered Himself; his blood was shed; the veil was rent; and he entered the heaven of heavens to sit down at the right hand of God in whose presence he now appears on our behalf. There is no more offering, no more sacrifice for sin; for he "offered one sacrifice for sins for ever" (Heb 10:12).

It is impossible to understand the eleventh chapter apart from its background in OT history. Edmund Burke once said that "people will not look forward to posterity who never look backward to their

ancestors". It is always good to look back, not in order to take pride in antiquity, but in order to gain strength for present emergencies and encouragement for the future by tracing our continuity with the past. This great roll-call of Hebrew worthies is a remarkable combination of patriotic fervour and spiritual feeling. Here were Abel, and Enoch, and Noah; here were Isaac, and Jacob, and Joseph; here were Sarah and Rahab; and time would fail to tell of men from the days of Barak to David.

But there were two giants of faith who were seen to stand head and shoulders above others. One was Abraham, the friend of God; the other was Moses, the man of God. "By faith, Abraham . . . went out, not knowing whither he went" (Heb 11:9). Why? The call of God had come to him in Ur of the Chaldees: "Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto the land that I will show thee" (Gen 12:1). He saw no sign in the sky; there was no change in his feelings; he had nothing except the call of God. But he dared to take God at his word and by faith he went out. He left the known for the unknown and came at last to a place where God told him to lift up his eyes: "For all the land that thou seest, to thee will I give it, and to thy seed for ever" (13:15). And then, Moses. "By faith, (Moses) . . . endured, as seeing him who is invisible" (Heb 11:27). Why? The call of God had come to him in the bush that burned with fire and was not consumed: "I will send thee unto Pharaoh that thou mayest bring forth my people . . . out of Egypt" (Exod 3:10). He could hardly believe that he was the man; had he not fled from the face of Pharaoh and spent his life in exile? But he dared to take God at His word, and by faith he went back to lead Israel out of Egypt, "not fearing the wrath of the king" (Heb 11:27). But Abraham, Moses, and countless unnamed others, all died in faith, not having received the promise, "that apart from us they should not be made perfect" (v40).

The main feature in chapter twelve is the sweeping antithesis between Sinai and Mount Zion (12:18-24). It draws heavily on the narrative in Exodus and Deuteronomy at the time when the law was made known to Moses (Exod 19:16-19; 20:18; Deut 4:10-12; 5:22-27). Readers are brought under the spell of a sublime picture while they listen to the cadence of a lyrical eloquence that has no equal in the NT.

On the one hand, there are the terrors of Sinai, and all that stood for distance and reserve; on the other hand, there are the glories of Zion, and all that stands for nearness and access. "For ye are not come unto a mount that might be touched and that burned with fire . . . ; but ye are come unto Mount Zion, and unto the city of the living God, the new Jerusalem" (Heb 12:18, 22). There had loomed before the eyes of

Israel that strange, mysterious mountain, physical, tangible, black with clouds and darkness, rent with storm and tempest, shrill with the sound of the trumpet and the awful voice of judgment. Israel cowered down by Moses, shrinking from that mountain of awe and woe; Moses himself confessed, in a traditional saying, to heart-shaking fear and terror (vv18-21).

Then the contrast is drawn in a passage whose style is marked by the complete absence of all definite articles, by rhythm and symmetry in structure, and by the skill with which each clause is grouped in pairs. Hitherto in this epistle, there had been such exhortations as "let us draw near" (Heb 4:16; 10:22). But this text is phrased in terms of access known and experienced: "Ye are come." It is addressed to those who have come in prospect to that goal whose ultimate attainment yet lies beyond. They have no abiding city in this world; they seek "the city which is to come" (13:14). It is in that city, the new Jerusalem, built as it were on Mount Zion, that they will join angel hosts, and the church of the first-born, the Judge of all, and just men made perfect, and the Mediator of the new covenant with the blood of sprinkling that is infinitely better than the blood of Abel's sacrifice (12:22-24).

The last chapter begins with a series of short staccato injunctions of a practical character. Then the writer gave a golden reason why his readers should be content in the circumstances in which they found themselves: "For himself hath said, I will in no wise fail thee, neither will I in any wise forsake thee" (Heb 13:5). That great promise had been addressed, first to Joshua, then to Solomon, at two crucial moments in OT history. Then at last it was caught up in this verse and applied for the benefit of all believers. Moses had been charged to convey this assurance to Joshua when he committed to him the leadership of Israel: "Be strong and of a good courage; . . . for the Lord thy God, he it is that doth go with thee; he will not fail thee, nor forsake thee" (Deut 31:6; Josh 1:5). David was to reiterate the same promise to Solomon when he entrusted him with the erection of the temple: "Be strong and of a good courage; . . . for the Lord thy God, even my God, is with thee; he will not fail thee nor forsake thee" (1 Chr 28:20). That promise is quoted in this chapter in a form which gives it a place in the glorious heritage of God's people in all generations, and there is a very beautiful connection with the words that follow: "For himself hath said, I will in no wise fail thee, neither will I in any wise forsake thee. So that with good courage we say, the Lord is my helper; I will not fear" (Heb 13:5-6).

There are, as it were, two voices: perhaps rather, just one strong voice, and its heartfelt echo. God speaks to us so that we may speak to

Him: his word is rich in love, so that ours may be full of faith. Each word is in the form of an OT quotation, for it is as though the only fitting response to the promise of God is in the words of the Psalmist (Ps 118:6). God who spoke in time past by the prophets confirms this word for his people in all generations: it was said by himself. Men who heard in time past like the Psalmist teach us how to reply: God has spoken so that we may now speak what he has said. Was not that a glorious note on which to conclude this great letter which binds the Old and New in one with Christ Himself as its sun and centre?

The unity and assurance with which the OT and NT alike declare the Word of God is meant for the great and endless comfort of his people. The God of our fathers still speaks through his Word with unique authority. We stand in need of a direct personal assurance such as David longed for: "Say unto my soul, I am thy salvation" (Ps 35:3). Nothing can take the place of a particular saying of God like that; but it must not end at that point. It is equally relevant for the Church and the world in which we live.

The Church of God is a foreign body in a worldly society; it is meant to be a colony of heaven planted in an alien world. A colony in the proper sense of the word was defined by Johnson as "a body of people drawn from the mother country to inhabit some distant place". New South Wales was such a colony, albeit of a peculiar character, and the first free settlers brought with them the laws of England as their inheritance. Sir Victor Windeyer has given notable expression to what this meant. "I like to think," he wrote, "of this unseen cargo that the original settlers brought as like the fire from the sacred hearth of their city hall that in ancient times Greek emigrants took with them when setting out to found a colony on the other side of the Aegean, the embers to be kindled to flame afresh in the new land" (1974). The Word of God is the sacred cargo with which the Church of God has been entrusted, and the Church is the colony which God has established in the midst of an alien society. Such a colony is in the world, and yet not of the world; it is at one and the same time called out of the world and sent forth into the world.

Hebrew converts were in just that situation; they were living in the age of the NT and were nourished from the word of the OT. But they did not exist for their own sake alone, nor was the Word of God only for them. They were in this world for the sake of the gospel, and the gospel exists for the sake of the world. What the Church of that or any other age needs may be put in the words of Morris West in *The Shoes of the Fisherman*: "Find me men with fire in their hearts, and wings on their feet".