

Believing the Hebrew Bible

The exchange between Alan Goldberg and Marvin Wilson (appearing in the winter and current issues of *A Journal from the Radical Reformation*) illustrates a longstanding struggle over the right way to read the Bible. Though Christians officially consider the Hebrew Bible a part of Christian revelation, various methods of “reinterpretation” conspire to dissolve the essential linkage of the Old Testament with the New. It is perhaps no exaggeration to say that a failure to balance the Hebrew Bible with the New Testament documents is the single factor producing the chaotic doctrinal diversification apparent in denominational Christendom.

One may claim to believe in the Hebrew Bible but then proceed to read the New Testament ignoring the lessons inculcated by the Old Testament. One has then made a gesture of support for belief in the Hebrew Scriptures while actually denying their authority. A classic example would be “liberal” theology’s treatment of fundamental statements concerning Jesus’ origin and his office as Messiah, both Old Testament themes. Luke writes: “The holy spirit will come upon you [Mary] . . . for that reason the holy offspring shall be called the Son of God.” “And the Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever” (Luke 1:35, 32, 33). Characteristic of modern treatment of Luke’s account is the following:

The Jewish-Christian sources [of the birth narratives] do not guarantee the historic reality of the miraculous conception. The narratives themselves contain features which tend to raise doubts on this point. In both writers [Matthew and Luke] the belief in it rests on angelic communications . . . The stories owe in fact much of their charm to this naive angelology.¹

So much for the doctrine of the virginal conception of Jesus! It is apparently not something that modern thinkers can take seriously. But what of the promise that Jesus is to reign over the house of Jacob on David’s throne?

¹ James MacKinnon, *The Historic Jesus*, Longmans, Green and Co, 1931, 4.

In the Lukan version the Messiah, whose birth the angel proclaims, is depicted in the form of a king who shall reoccupy and hold forever the throne of his father (ancestor) David. A restored Jewish Kingdom is predicted, and this prediction ultimately proved not only an illusion, but incompatible with the spiritual kingdom which Jesus proclaimed and sought to establish. Here again the angelic communication, under the influence of current belief, is based on a misconception of historic reality. It is, to say the least, rather disconcerting to find what purports to be a revelation from a heavenly source misinterpreting a prophecy and also predicting a restored Davidic kingdom which *failed to materialise*.²

A believer in Old Testament Scripture and the method of divine dealings with Israel would have been accustomed to accepting as divinely authoritative information supplied by the angel of the Lord. Already in Luke Zechariah had been severely punished for his skepticism at an angelic communication. It is unprecedented to discard angelic testimony on the grounds that doubts are raised by the accounts. Similarly, the throne of David is a concept thoroughly clarified by the Hebrew Bible. The Old Testament is abandoned when an entirely new meaning is attached to David's throne on the pretext that a "concrete" restoration of David's throne is incompatible with the "spiritual" kingdom advocated by Jesus. Luke foresaw the restoration of Davidic kingship in the only terms compatible with Hebrew revelation.

The practice of reading the Bible without believing it could never have gained acceptance if the conceptual patterns promoted by the Hebrew Bible were retained. Faith would require belief in Jesus' restoration to David's throne in Jerusalem, an event which has evidently not yet occurred.

Evangelical Christians are sharply divided in their understanding of such a basic term as "Israel." One camp insists that Israel must refer to the national Israelites, while the other sees the Jew/Gentile Church as entitled to be called "Israel." If proper attention had been paid to the Old Testament's linkage with the New, it would be clear that both camps were right and that current antagonism over the point is unjustified. The New Testament constantly takes Old Testament passages and applies them to the Church. In support of this obvious continuity of "Israel" from the Old Testament nation to the New Testament Church, Paul refers to the Christians as "the Israel of God"³ and "the true circumcision."⁴ Hebrew Scripture also contains major blocks of

² *Ibid.*, 5, 6, emphasis added.

³ Gal. 6:16.

⁴ Phil. 3:3.

information about the ultimate restoration of national Israel, consequent upon the arrival of the Messiah at his Parousia. This complementary truth finds expression in Paul's anticipation of a recovery of the nation of Israel when it finally accepts its Messiah.⁵ Israel the nation may then rightfully, upon acceptance of their Messiah Jesus, become part of the Israel of God which exists now as the Church.

A false way of reading the biblical evidence — ignoring the Hebrew Bible — is to maintain that contemporary national Israel has a right to the land of Israel simply because it is descended from Abraham. Such a distortion of the Old Testament could never have made progress if the words of Hosea had been noted:⁶ Israel was to be declared “not my people” while she remained in disobedience. Israel has not accepted the Messiah. (This is not to argue the rights and wrongs of Israel's position in terms of current politics.)

Examples of the abandonment of Old Testament Scripture can be multiplied. Groups which deny the existence of the personal Satan and apply the term Satan to internal human nature should have been corrected by the Hebrew Bible which never makes “satan” a synonym for the evil inherent within man. A reading of Matthew's Olivet prophecy applying it exclusively to AD 70 would have gained no ground if Jesus' explicit linking of the abomination with Daniel's prediction had not been ignored.⁷ The data associated with Daniel's abomination in 11:31 and 12:11 will not fit the events of AD 70. Again, in the study of prophecy, Revelation's confederacy of 10 kings or kingdoms was arbitrarily connected with the Roman empire, instead of with a Middle Eastern association of 10 nations listed prophetically in Psalm 83.

The foundation for sound Bible study was laid by Jesus himself when he “opened their minds to understand the Scriptures,” by explaining the things written about himself in the “law of Moses, the prophets and the Psalms.”⁸ For much of Christian history Christians have not been firmly enough anchored in the Bible in which Jesus and Paul were nurtured. They have been trying to explain the New Testament by disconnecting it from the Old. The result has been a crypto-Marcionism, more difficult to detect because it has existed alongside the claim that the Hebrew Bible had not been set aside. The quest for Jewish roots as a safeguard against mistaken readings of the New Testament needs to go on with all urgency. It is the only way barriers between the denominations will fall.

⁵ Rom. 11:25-28.

⁶ Hos. 1:9, 10.

⁷ Matt. 24:15.

⁸ Lk. 24:45, 44.