

## *Lecture I*

### OLD TESTAMENT THEOLOGY AND HISTORY

ONE who examines carefully the present theological climate of opinion cannot but be struck by the rapidity with which it has supplanted and is supplanting theological positions of a former day. The change has been rapid, indeed, so rapid, that some, it would seem, have not yet been able to catch their theological breath. At one moment we found ourselves in an atmosphere which exalted man and his powers and at the same time depreciated and disparaged doctrine. Today such an attitude seems strange. On all hands we hear of the importance of doctrine and of theology. We are told that we must not place too great an emphasis upon human ability, but must rather stress the grace of God. And we must be biblical, passionately biblical, in all our thinking.

#### *(a) The Present Interest in Old Testament Theology*

Towards the close of the last century, it may be said that there existed a certain climate of theological opinion. That climate was the result of long years of growth. Undergirding the entire picture and foundational to it was the Darwinian theory of evolution with its consequent belief in the inevitable progress and advance of mankind toward the higher and the better.<sup>1</sup> In the field of New Testament studies the purely human Jesus of Adolph Harnack was on the throne.<sup>2</sup> And in the realm of the Old Testament the reconstruction of Israel's history and religion as it had been popularly presented by Wellhausen,

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was in a position of dominance. As has often been noted, Wellhausen's reconstruction was somewhat influenced by the philosophical views of Hegel, and these views were congenial to the general tenor of thought of the day.<sup>3</sup> When we turn to the field of theology, we note that the position of Albrecht Ritschl with his emphasis upon value judgments was influential.<sup>4</sup> All of those views and tendencies seemed to be complementary. All fitted in quite comfortably with the prevailing stress upon the inherent goodness of man. Furthermore, all of them could be and were popularized. They expressed themselves in the churches as that phenomenon which, for want of a better term, is commonly designated "modernism". Man was told, in effect, how good he was, and how unimportant doctrine was. Not creed, but life, was the slogan, for doctrine divides, but service unites. The words of Pope were, in effect, made the slogan of the entire world of thought of the time:

*For modes of faith let graceless zealots fight.  
He can't be wrong whose life is in the right.*<sup>5</sup>

Modernism, however, never asked, at least in any serious manner, by what standard one could judge whether a person's life was in the right. Today, modernism, in its older form, appears to be on the wane. The heart has been taken out of it. This is not to say that it does not linger on here and there, but the "older" modernism, with the force that it presented in the decade 1920-30, is no longer present.

Today, an entirely different climate of opinion is about us. It is the fashion at present in some circles to decry evolution, and to place great stress and emphasis upon the importance and significance of doctrine. Theology once again is being regarded as the queen of the sciences. Undergirding both New and Old Testament studies is that method of approach commonly known as Form

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Criticism.<sup>6</sup> In the Old Testament field many of the positions once espoused by Wellhausen have been rejected. For the most part that aspect of his views which may be called the Development Hypothesis has been discarded, while most scholars today do agree with him in advocating some form of Documentary Hypothesis.<sup>7</sup> Undergirding much of modern thought is the philosophy of Immanuel Kant, and, in the field of theology, dialecticism and existentialism wield a tremendous influence.

Whereas the older complex of views paid little attention thereto, the dominant complex has much to say about theology. Inasmuch as we are concerned primarily with Old Testament theology, we shall seek to note, in particular, what it has to say—and it has much to say—about the subject. In the field of Old Testament studies theology has become quite popular, and books on the subject are appearing with some frequency.

According to Von Rad, who has published an extremely interesting work on the subject, Old Testament theology is one of the most recent of all the Biblical sciences.<sup>8</sup> Its history, he says, dates from the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries, and that history can be told rapidly. It is worthy of note, he continues, that up until today it has not been possible to reach agreement as to the object of the science. The research of the last twenty to thirty years (Von Rad wrote in May, 1957) has helped in this respect, however, for it has brought about a surprising *rapprochement* between the science of Introduction and Biblical Theology.<sup>9</sup>

In the sense in which Von Rad employs the term, Old Testament theology is a comparatively late science. The first representative of the subject is usually thought to be Gabler.<sup>10</sup> Many of the older commentaries also contain material on the subject. One who works through the writings of the old masters, such as Hengstenberg, Keil,

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Drechsler, or Delitzsch, will find that there is much in their writings that can truly be designated Old Testament theology. The same, however, is true of the writings of the reformers, Calvin and Luther, and for that matter, of some of the fathers. But the study of Old Testament theology as a science probably takes its rise with the work of Gabler. We may also note, in passing, the emphasis that was recently given to this subject by the late Geerhardus Vos at a time when the climate of opinion spoke more favourably of Histories of the Religion of Israel than of Old Testament Theology.

### *(b) The Background of the Present Interest*

What are the causes which have led to the present revival of emphasis upon the subject? Perhaps this question cannot be fully answered. It is probable, however, and this is acknowledged by some who do not accept the full trustworthiness of Scripture, that the barrenness of the negative critical study of the Old Testament during the nineteenth century led to a reaction. During this century there was much emphasis upon the analysis of documents, and upon the so-called minutiae of "criticism". Was the Old Testament, however, merely a book to dissect into documents? When one had determined the extent of J, E, D and P and of any minor documents, had he done his full task? More and more, the same type of scholar who, had he been living in the nineteenth century, would, as far as one can tell, have fallen in line with the then dominant approach to the Old Testament, is now crying out that there is after all something more to the Bible than mere documentary analysis. The Bible, it is being said, has an abiding message; it speaks to the men of our day, and our task is to discover what that message is.

If this nineteenth-century study of the Old Testament in fact was so barren, one may wonder why the dis-

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covery was not made sooner. Those who engaged in the study itself apparently did not think that it was barren, and they were strong in their opposition to the view that the Bible was a special revelation from God. There must then have been another and deeper reason for the shift from the practice of mere documentary analysis to that of study of the content of the Old Testament. For our part we think that this shift was brought about by factors such as the discoveries of archaeology and the tragic events in the world during recent years. Archaeology has shown that the Old Testament history is far more trustworthy than was acknowledged by Wellhausen and others of his day, and it has in general supported the position of those who regard the Bible as trustworthy.

The two tragic wars which our century has witnessed have caused men to ask the question whether man himself is, as a matter of fact, inherently good. Earlier thinkers and writers had, in effect, challenged the easy-going assumption that man was not a fallen and depraved creature. Kierkegaard, although he did not write from the standpoint of Biblical orthodoxy, has had a deep influence, and Dostoevski in his novels has portrayed mankind as depraved. One cannot read *Crime and Punishment* and at the same time speak of the inherent goodness of human nature. Nor does the vicious cruelty which the recent wars exhibited speak well of mankind. A shift in theological emphasis was bound to come.

What shall we say about this shift in emphasis? Is it a return to the orthodoxy of the Church, to the true teaching of Holy Scripture? Is it a re-emphasis upon that wondrous saving Gospel of salvation which has brought life and hope to so many thousands who were in the bondage of sin? Apparently there are some who think that this is so. If, on the other hand, it is not entirely to be identified with the historic position of the Church, is it, at least, a

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step in that direction? Is it, in effect, a return to the Reformation?

These questions, we think, can be answered fairly easily. Whatever else the modern emphasis may be, it is not a revival of orthodoxy. Its advocates are the last people in the world who would want to be known as orthodox, and to seek to identify this revival of theology with orthodox Christianity is to mistake its true character.

The modern emphasis upon Old Testament theology fits in well with modern thought. It is perfectly willing, to mention but one aspect of the question, to make use of a criticism of the Bible which leads to results contrary to the Bible's own testimony. This may be seen, for example, by Von Rad's approach to the study of the traditions of Israel. Von Rad aligns himself at once on the side of what is today called the traditio-historical method of investigation, and takes issue with the older literary criticism.<sup>11</sup> This older literary criticism, he says, believed that standing more or less immediately behind the present literary form of the books there was the historical course of events, at least, in their essentials, and that literary criticism could grasp this course of events. We now know, however, he says, that such is not so. At best, we can simply find definite conceptions and representations of old traditions which go back to different circles. In studying each unit of tradition we must apply the method of Form Criticism. The individual narrative units which we find in the documents J and E have a long history behind them. At first, says Von Rad, they stood alone, independent, but in course of time they came to be incorporated in the great blocks of tradition, and these blocks of tradition were themselves later joined together in accordance with a definite theological picture of sacred history (*Heilsgeschichte*)<sup>12</sup>.

It is difficult for us today, so the argument continues, to

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obtain knowledge of the historical events in this early period because the framework of the Hexateuchal tradition has been destroyed and a cultic-canonical scheme has predominated. Another factor which makes the early history of Israel difficult to study is the fact that the present sources support the tradition that the nation arose in Egypt. But historical investigation has shown that the word "Israel" was used only as the designation of the sacral tribal bond, which was constituted only after the entrance of the individual tribes into Canaan.<sup>13</sup>

It should be apparent that Von Rad employs a method of approach which is perfectly willing to make use of a "criticism" that will lead to results which conflict with the Bible's witness to itself. We have mentioned Von Rad's work because it is one of the latest and most competent treatises upon the subject of Old Testament theology. And whereas not all writers are willing to accept a position so radical as that of Von Rad, he may nevertheless be justly singled out as a most capable representative of one aspect of the modern emphasis upon Old Testament theology.

### (c) *The Historical Setting of Old Testament Theology*

We may perhaps arrive at a better evaluation of modern Old Testament theology, and at a better understanding of Old Testament theology in general, if we study it in relation to history. The religion of the Bible is a religion that is founded squarely upon certain things that God did in history. According to the Bible, there was a very definite intrusion of the supernatural into the affairs of men. As the late J. Gresham Machen put it, "The centre and core of all the Bible is history. Everything else that the Bible contains is fitted into an historical framework and leads up to an historical climax. The Bible is primarily a record of events."<sup>14</sup> It is in this manner that the great saving events of Old Testament history are presented. "I am the

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LORD thy God, which brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage". (Exodus xx, 2)

The teaching of this text is perfectly clear. God is here represented as speaking to the nation as a unit. He speaks to the entire nation, it should be noted, and not to a few individual tribes. According to this work of the Lord, the nation as a unit was once in the land of Egypt, which to it was a house of bondage. There was a time when the nation of Israel was in bondage to the nation of Egypt. Such a condition did not continue, however, for Israel was relieved of her bondage, in that God Himself brought her out of Egypt. God intervened in human history and wrought the deliverance which set Israel free.

It must ever be remembered that everything which occurs takes place because God has so decreed it. We may see the hand of God in all things that take place round about us, and in all the events of history. There is also a certain sense in which we may legitimately speak of God's working in any event of history. It is God's providential working. Is this providential working of God in history that to which this particular verse of Exodus has reference? The answer is no. This verse clearly teaches that the Exodus from Egypt was the result of a special work of God. It follows that any description of the Exodus as an historical event, if one would do justice to this particular verse, must include the statement that God Himself brought Israel out of Egypt. God, according to this verse, did intervene in the history of Israel in a special way.

We may note another example, namely, the account of the Fall, which is recorded in the third chapter of Genesis. Whatever we today may think about the course of events there depicted, it would seem that the writer of this chapter believed that he was writing an account of something that in fact took place on this earth. It would seem that he believed that there was such a place as the



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Garden of Eden, else why his detailed attempt to locate the Garden? He believed that there was a man named Adam and a woman named Eve, and that a serpent spoke to them. By an act of disobedience upon the part of Adam, according to the author of Genesis, sin entered the world. The account does not bear the marks of legend or parable. Nor is there the slightest evidence to support the position that the writer thought he was recounting the experience of every man. The writer in no way indicates that he thought he was writing about his own experience.

We today may say that we do not believe that the events recorded in the third chapter of Genesis took place, but we do not have warrant for the assumption that the writer himself did not think that he was penning history. The man who says, "The writer of the third chapter of Genesis thought that he was writing history but I do not believe that history" is a better exegete than the man who says that the events recorded in the third chapter of Genesis are profoundly true but that the writer never intended them to be taken as history.

The religion presented in the Old Testament, then, according to its own representation, is an historical religion. It is grounded upon that which God Himself did in history. Remove this historical foundation from it and there is no longer any true biblical religion. There can be no true Old Testament theology, unless it does justice to the historical basis upon which it must rest. To be truly biblical, Old Testament theology must pay due heed to the requirements of history.

At this point we must give consideration to a word that has featured prominently in recent discussions of Old Testament theology. It is the word *Heilsgeschichte*. This word *Heilsgeschichte* simply means "history of salvation" or "salvation history" or "holy history". In itself, it would seem to represent a thoroughly Biblical concept, namely,

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the fact that God through the ages has carried out His purpose of redeeming mankind. There is surely a certain sense in which all things subserve this purpose of God in redemption. "All things", the inspired writer says, "work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose." (Romans viii, 28) It is consequently to be expected that students of Scripture would trace and would emphasize the great saving events of biblical history. We may expect Christian students to devote more time to the Exodus from Egypt, for example, than to what the book of Exodus has to say about the Amalekites. This does not mean for a moment that what the Exodus has to say about the Amalekites is unimportant. It is important, for it provides a part of the background against which the redeeming acts of God are the better to be understood. Important as it is, however, what the Bible has to say about the Amalekites is certainly not so immediately relevant to us and to our needs, as is that which it has to say about the Exodus itself.

It is understandable, therefore, that scholars should devote more attention to the primary message of Scripture, namely, God's gracious saving work. One need but examine the writings of the commentators who lived before Reformation times to discover that this is so. It was also true of Luther and Calvin, although neither of these dismissed any portion of Scripture as of no consequence. This fact must be stressed, despite the emphasis which today is placed upon Luther's words that that is Scripture which presents Christ (*was Christum treibet*).

In post-Reformation times we may note the work of George Calixtus, *De pactis quae Deus cum hominibus iniit* (1656) in which the author sought to show how God had made various covenants with man and that in these covenants there was a progressive revelation. In this work doctrine was not divorced from history, but rather history

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was made its setting and background. God worked in human history, and in this history He established His covenant with man.

At a much later time, J. C. K. von Hofmann also stressed the history of redemption, laying emphasis upon the importance of Messianic prophecy.<sup>15</sup> The full significance of a particular prophecy was not discernible at the time of its utterance, he maintained, but only in the light of the history of redemption itself, which would find its completion in the end of the ages. With this work of von Hofmann in mind, we may well ask the question, "What can be said about *Heilsgeschichte* in present-day study of the Old Testament?"

At this stage it is necessary to make an important distinction. The Germans have two words which may be translated by the English word history, namely, *Historie* and *Geschichte*. As the word *Historie* is employed, it seems to be the equivalent of what we normally speak of as history. An event which occurs in *Historie* is an historical event. It took place on this earth and on a definite day of the calendar. Napoleon was defeated at Waterloo on 18 June, 1815. That is an historical event. It belongs to *Historie*. It occurred at a certain place and on a certain calendar day. It may be the object of investigation upon the part of the historian. Historians may differ in their interpretation of the event and of the reasons which brought it to pass. They may not be able, for one reason or another, to learn all that there is to learn about the event, but that it was an event which took place here upon this earth at a particular place and on a particular day is a fact which, unless all the sources are deliberately deceiving us, has occurred.

What, however, is to be said about the word *Geschichte*? This word also means "history", and sometimes is employed as a synonym for *Historie*. We may legitimately speak, for example, of a *Geschichte des deutschen Volkes*, and

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when we find a volume with such a title, we have every warrant for believing that it will be an account of the history of the German people. We may also employ the word in speaking of the history of Israel. And the word may certainly be legitimately used in speaking of the history of redemption.

Is there not, however, another sense in which the word is often employed today? Does not Karl Barth, to take but one example, use the word in quite a different sense? It is at this stage that the modern approach to Christianity makes itself apparent. The word *Geschichte* is often employed today, not in the sense of history, as that word is commonly understood, but rather to designate some other realm, such as that which is above history. By way of example, we may cite the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. According to the Bible and the traditional belief of the Church, the body of Jesus Christ came to life on the third day by means of a mighty miracle. The Resurrection is thus seen to be an historical event. There was a tomb at a particular spot in Palestine, and in this tomb the dead body of the Lord was placed. On the third day, a particular calendar day of our history, that tomb was empty, and the reason why it was empty was that God performed a miracle. The body of the Lord emerged from the tomb. Christ rose from the dead. Paul puts it with singular force, "And if Christ be not risen, then is our preaching vain, and your faith is also vain. Yea, and we are found false witnesses of God; because we have testified of God that he raised up Christ: whom he raised not up, if so be that the dead rise not. For if the dead rise not, then is not Christ raised: And if Christ be not raised, your faith is vain; ye are yet in your sins." (1 Corinthians xv, 14-17) If there is anything clear in the Bible, it is that the Lord Jesus Christ rose from the dead. The resurrection, according to the Bible, is an historical event.