

## Chapter One

### **Don't let your New Testament get in the way of your Old Testament**

In many and various ways God spoke of old by the prophets; but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son

(Hebrews 1:1-2).

"Some day I am going to write a book about all the unchristian sayings in the New Testament!" Thus, in a tone at least partially serious, a well-known Old Testament scholar revealed his unhappiness with the sometimes less-than-subtle claim of his New Testament colleagues that theirs was the superior Testament. According to the common generalization, the New Testament is the source of all that is good, kind, and loving, embodied most of all in the person of Jesus Christ who reveals the friendly face of God. As the story goes, however, the Old Testament is at best a mixed bag. The occasional flash of brilliance may lighten the path of the believer, but on the whole, the angry, the vindictive, the bloodthirsty, is far more prominent.

Now I suspect that there is at least a grain of truth in this common view of the two parts of our Christian Bible. At least I have never heard a Christian contrast the beauty and attractiveness of the Old Testament with the horrors of the New. No, Christians have always found refuge in the New Testament when the problems of the Old Testament have threatened to engulf them. In fact, some Christians even go so far as to claim with emphasis that they are New Testament Christians for whom the Old Testament is no longer authoritative.

Even if the problems with the Old Testament should stem from some monumental misunderstanding, the fact that such a misunderstanding is so common is something we must reckon with. But perhaps at the outset I should remind you of some of the likely candidates for my friend's book on the so-called unchristian aspects of the New Testament. Wasn't it Jesus who suggested that certain people deserved to have a millstone fastened round their necks and to be drowned in the depths of the sea (Matt. 18:6)? And didn't he openly call some people blind hypocrites, comparing them to an old burial ground, full of dead men's bones (Matt. 23:27-28)? And then there was Peter. For all practical purposes he told Ananias and Sapphira to drop dead (Acts 5:1-11). To add to the stories, Paul told the church at Corinth to deliver one of their brothers to Satan for the destruction of the flesh (1 Cor. 5:5), and to drive out the wicked person from among them (1 Cor. 5:13). Finally, we must not forget the book of Revelation: blood, dragons, pits of fire, and even a God who spews people out of his mouth (Rev. 3:16).

You could rightly accuse me of greatly distorting the faith by bringing that particular collection of sayings and events together without regard for context or the author's apparent intention. But that is precisely what happens to the Old Testament. Having grown up in the Christian community, I know the basic Old Testament "list" quite well. Pride of place goes to poor Uzzah who was only trying to be helpful when stumbling oxen endangered the ark of God, yet God

struck him dead (2 Sam. 6:6-9); two angry bears mauled forty-two "innocent" children who were disrespectful to their elders (2 Kings 2:23-25). If you are so bold as to complain about the way God is doing things, then he will send serpents to bite you (Num. 21:4-9) or he will command the earth to swallow you alive (Num. 16:21-35). If you wish, you may add to the list the Genesis flood and the burning of Sodom and Gomorrah, for these, too, have often been cited as part of the evidence for a heavy-handed Old Testament God who flies into a destructive rage the moment someone crosses his will or breaks one of his commands.

Now I hope that you will pardon the way in which I have listed the above horror stories. If it is not already too late, I should perhaps even make a special plea right here for you not to toss aside such an irreverent book as this. I have several good friends who think it highly inappropriate ever to say anything that even hints at the slightest deficiency in God's style of leadership (perhaps taking their cue from Romans 9:20), and they are quick to caution me about the dangers of doubt. I am sensitive to those who feel that way, for I, too, am deeply concerned about the damage that doubt can cause. In this world, none of us is ever "safe" from doubt, but as I put these words on paper, I must say that my convictions about the goodness of God are deeper and stronger because I have looked squarely at my "small" doubts and have found answers which have brought genuine blessing.

When I say "small" doubts, I am alluding to the fact that my experience has always been within the Christian community. I am the product of a careful and devout Christian home—a home for which I am immensely thankful. At the same time, the Old Testament stories (and the New Testament ones) of the type listed above can leave scars when mishandled and applied wrongly, even by well-meaning Christians. I know that I am not alone in having had at least "small" doubts as a result of biblical material misunderstood and misapplied. Small doubts can easily mushroom into large ones and become extremely destructive. Indeed, even small doubts are no fun. But what is perhaps most significant for this book is that the very material which previously had been the cause of doubt has now become the source of great blessing.

So I intend to speak quite frankly about some of the "problems" of the Old Testament. I really hope that those who have struggled with these same problems will also be able to transform their doubts into cornerstones of faith. From my own experience, I am convinced that once we have found faith, we must resist the attempt to command it in others. My doubts have seldom if ever yielded to mere commands, least of all to commands not to doubt! I must take my problems seriously. To be able to believe is a precious possession, one that I covet for all of God's children. And though I am sure that no two of us ever find precisely the same path to faith, I am going to approach the problems directly, assuming that those insights that have been a great help to me can also be of help to someone else.

## A "BETTER" REVELATION?

Right at the beginning of this chapter I noted the sharp contrast that is often drawn between the Old Testament and the New. That contrast is very important and we must not simply deny that it exists, for the very fact that God has chosen such different ways of revealing himself is part of the truth that he wants us to understand. We need no better authority than the book of Hebrews to remind us, that, in some ways at least, the New Testament revelation of God is, in fact, better. The theme of the entire book is that the revelation of God in Jesus Christ is "better." The very first verse reminds us that in times past God used other methods of revealing his will, but now he has spoken through his Son (Heb. 1:1-2). But in chapter twelve the contrast is even more explicit: you have not come to a mountain of smoke, fire, and fear, but to Mt. Zion and to Jesus (Heb. 12:18-24). When I finally realized what those verses were saying, I was startled, for I had grown up in a Christian community which stressed the significance of the Sinai revelation. So in the

light of a "better" revelation (the clear thrust of the book of Hebrews), what are we to do with the older revelation, the one which centers on Sinai?

For a start, the word "better" can express two rather different emphases. First, "better" is often simply in contrast with "worse": yesterday your cold was "worse"—runny eyes, a frightful cough, a hoarse voice—but today it and you are "better." If that is the sort of contrast intended in Hebrews between the "better" Jesus Christ and the "worse" Mount Sinai, then the God of Sinai is indeed in trouble—as well as anyone who attempts to proclaim that both revelations are part of the Christian faith.

The second way of looking at "better" is to see it simply as the comparative of "good"; the revelation at Mount Sinai was good, and the revelation in Jesus Christ is "better." Maybe we could even add the superlative: personal reunion with God in his kingdom will be "best." If we can take such an approach to the two historical revelations of God, then there is no need to reject the first revelation; rather we may see it as a major step in God's plan of restoring humanity, and it is a good step at that. In fact, the Sinai revelation was precisely what God's people needed at that time.

One illustration that has helped me to visualize the relationship between "better" and "good" has to do with my boyhood experience with the family cars. It fell to my lot to keep the "buggy," as we affectionately dubbed it, clean and polished. Over the weeks and months I became quite good friends with the car. I knew each scratch and chip and did my best to touch them up or to polish them out. This personal friendship with the car became a problem only when it finally became evident that a new and better car was needed. I well remember when we sold our beloved little 1950 Chevrolet. It had been a good car, even though we had moved on to something better—a 1956 Ford. Thereafter I would occasionally catch a glimpse of the Chevy, now under the care of its new owners. A peculiar sensation of excitement and disappointment would strike me: "There's our old car! Oh, but it's not ours any more!" Perhaps those feelings explain why that next car, the '56 Ford, is still in the family. Its finely polished, deep metallic green is still a sight to warm the heart. Newer and better cars have come and gone, but that old one is still "good." It doesn't have air conditioning, something very helpful in the desert regions of the West, and we probably wouldn't take it on a long trip, but it was and is a good car. When we first bought it, it was just what the family needed and even now is a source of warm memories—as well as quite an adequate vehicle for short journeys.

I look on the relationship between Mount Sinai and Jesus Christ in a very similar way. I find the revelation of God in Christ a clearer and better revelation, but I certainly need not deny the marvelous experience that God gave to his people at Mount Sinai. It was just what they needed and it was good. Even today I can relive that experience and be blessed. The fullness of the revelation in Jesus can be joyfully received as Part Two of God's great drama without detracting in the slightest from the marvels of Part One as described in the Old Testament. With any good book it is possible to hasten ahead and read the conclusion without ever bothering with what precedes. If we do that with our Bibles, however, we are missing a real treat and we are letting the New Testament get in the way of the Old. Yes, the New Testament revelation of God is clearer and therefore in some ways better. But if we neglect the Old in favor of the New, we shall never really experience that peculiar kind of joy that comes from experiencing the movement of God's great plan from "good" to "better"—and to "best."

#### TWO APPROACHES TO THE OLD TESTAMENT: THE HIGH ROAD AND THE LOW ROAD

Another way in which the New Testament often gets in the way of the Old is also illustrated by the book of Hebrews. In particular, I am thinking of the famous "faith" chapter, Hebrews 11. If you read that chapter carefully and compare the stories there with the first accounts told in the

Old Testament, you will notice a fascinating tendency in Hebrews to tell the stories in such a way that God's men of ages past are all seen to be great men of faith. Perhaps it would not be too far amiss to compare what is happening in that list of stories to what often takes place at a funeral. Regardless of what kind of life a person has lived, the official memorial service remembers only the good. The deceased may have been a real villain, but you couldn't guess that from what is said in public! Hebrews 11 doesn't contain anything quite that extreme, but certainly the highlights of faith tend to exclude those less than complimentary features of the original Old Testament stories. Let's note just a few examples.

The Genesis picture of Abraham is a man of faith—but one whose convictions often wavered when put to the test. His half-truths to Pharaoh about Sarah showed not only his lack of faith in God, but also his selfishness and lack of genuine respect for his wife (Gen. 12:1-20). Likewise, when he decided that Hagar could bear the child of promise (Gen. 16), he betrayed an uncertain faith. To be sure, these lapses of faith can actually be encouraging to us, for here is a man with serious difficulties yet who was adjudged to be faithful (Heb. 11:8-19). The point that I want to make, however, is that the original Old Testament story is essential if one is to reap maximum benefit from the story in Hebrews. Hebrews 11 taken by itself is a fine story, but taken alongside the Old Testament story it becomes superb.

The mention of Sarah and of Moses in Hebrews 11 provides further examples of a partial telling of the Old Testament story. Hebrews 11:11 says that "by faith" Sarah conceived. Would you have guessed that she actually laughed when God first made the promise to her—unless of course you had read the Old Testament story (Gen. 18:9-15)? And the contrast in Moses' case is even sharper, for the Exodus story of the killing of the Egyptian and Moses' flight from Pharaoh makes it quite clear that Moses fled because he was afraid (Ex. 2:14). But Hebrews 11:27 says that "by faith" he left Egypt, "not (!) being afraid" of the anger of the king. The apparent contradiction between the two stories is resolved by a clearer understanding of what "by faith" means in Hebrews 11, namely, that faith can work wonders even when the human agent does not really appear to be faithful. Yet that particular understanding of faith is possible only when one carefully compares the original Old Testament story with the interpretation of that story in Hebrews 11. Now I happen to believe that both the Old Testament and the New Testament stories have an independent value of their own and should be appreciated for their own sake, but linking the two together enhances our ability to understand God's activities. I shall return to this point later, but now I want to note what has happened to the general interpretation of the Old Testament in view of the treatment that it receives in Hebrews 11.

Just as Hebrews 11 tends to focus on the highlights of Old Testament characters, emphasizing their faithfulness, their godliness, their commitment, so subsequent Christian interpretation has tended to glorify this "royal line" of God-fearing people. Such an emphasis is valuable; in an age when heroes are hard to come by, it is important to understand what a real hero is. Nevertheless, I remember my surprise when I actually got around to reading the Old Testament stories themselves after having heard only Christian interpretations of these stories. Some of the realistic and seamier aspects of the biblical characters came as real surprises. The horrors of polygamy didn't really snap clear until I read the biblical edition of the story of Jacob's family. The book of Esther is even more surprising. I had pictured her as a virtuous young lady without any taint—the feminine counterpart of Daniel. But when I actually read the biblical account, I began to realize that her standards of morality were quite different from mine. Not only was she willing to keep quiet about her convictions (Esther 2:10), but she was willing simply to be one of the girls, a part of the Persian king's harem (Esther 2:12-18)! Daniel stood firmly for his convictions and his standards of morality line up rather well with what a modern Christian would consider appropriate. But Esther ...!

I began to realize that Christians have often taken a "high road" approach to the Old Testament, which, in my case at least, had left me quite unprepared for the reading of the Bible itself. Subconsciously I had formed an image of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as classic saints who

could quite easily slip into twentieth century dress and, if called upon, could easily assume positions of leadership in the Christian community. I suspect that this glorified conception of Old Testament saints is at least part of the reason why many Christians tend to read interpretations and adaptations of the Old Testament instead of actually reading the Old Testament itself. The emphasis on the good qualities of biblical characters is very necessary, especially in the training of younger children, but I feel keenly about the need to prepare Christians for the actual reading of the Old Testament, and to prepare them for coming to grips with the real Old Testament stories, even though many of them are not pretty when viewed strictly from an aesthetic point of view.

I sometimes use the term "low road" to describe an approach to the Old Testament which takes account of the failings of the biblical characters and their strange, even barbaric, customs. The implications of this "low road" approach will be pursued further in chapter 2, but the point I wish to make here is, that the "high road" approach (cf. Hebrews 11), when not accompanied by the "low road", leaves one quite unprepared for the reading of the Old Testament itself. Thus, when a sensitive person comes upon a story which depicts how far the people had fallen, rather than how far they had grown, the natural reaction is to shy away from the Old Testament and resort to safer reading in the Gospels. In a sense, then, the New Testament has got in the way of the Old.

This predominance of the "high road" approach in dealing with the Old Testament came rather forcibly to my attention one day in my elementary Hebrew class. The class was composed of upper division ministerial students who were, in most cases, not more than a few months away from entering the ministry. The exercises in our grammar book had been modeled on biblical phrases so as to prepare the students for the reading of the biblical passages, and it was one of these exercises that caused an interesting problem for several members of the class. Correctly translated, one particular exercise should have read: "And Samuel cut off the head of the king." Since the Hebrew was not difficult even for first-year students, I asked why this particular sentence had been a problem. Most revealing was the reply volunteered by one of my students: "We thought that was what the sentence said, but we didn't think that Samuel would do such a thing!" I suggested we take our Bibles and read (in English) the story of Agag in 1 Samuel. To one thoroughly familiar with the Old Testament, the story of Agag might raise certain questions, but the particulars would not be surprising. Yet it was a subdued group of ministerial students who listened in some astonishment to the following words: "And Samuel said, 'As your sword has made women childless, so shall your mother be childless among women.' And Samuel hewed Agag in pieces before the Lord in Gilgal" (1 Sam. 15:33).

In the discussion that followed, it became evident that they had been deeply impressed with the "high road" picture of the innocent and obedient boy Samuel in the temple, saying: "Speak, for thy servant hears" (1 Sam. 3:10). How could that little boy take a sword and hew a man in pieces—even if it was before the Lord? Such a strange act for such a good lad! To come down to our own age, it would seem even stranger for my pastor to take a sword and to hew a wicked elder or deacon to pieces before the Lord. But that is part of the Old Testament picture which we must seek to understand and one to which we must return later.

## NEW TESTAMENT INTERPRETATIONS OF THE OLD

There remains yet one more major way in which the New Testament has tended to get in the way of the Old, and that has to do with the way that Christian interpreters have tended to take later usage or interpretation of a passage as the correct and only possible one. In actual practice, this approach has meant that when a New Testament writer refers to an Old Testament passage this later interpretation becomes authoritative in a way that subtly implies that the study of the original passage is really no longer necessary. Such an attitude has tended to limit greatly the study of the Old Testament, for when someone studies an original Old Testament passage he may

find that the Old Testament writer has given a different emphasis from that in the New. To illustrate, we could simply refer to the interpretation of Moses' killing of the Egyptian in Hebrews as compared with the original thrust of the story in Exodus. Inspired writers are often legitimately creative in their use of other inspired material, but to appeal to Hebrews, for example, as the source for the original as well as the final meaning of the Exodus passage is quite inappropriate. Yet Christian interpreters are strongly tempted to do just that type of thing.

Perhaps the classic example of a New Testament interpretation getting in the way of an Old Testament passage is Matthew's use of Isaiah 7:14 as a proof text for the Virgin Birth in Matthew 1:22-23. Conservative Christians have always appealed to Matthew 1 as one of the passages that establishes the Virgin Birth. And the meaning in Matthew is clear: Jesus was born of a virgin. But the interpretation of Isaiah 7:14 is quite a different matter. If we try to read Isaiah 7 as an Old Testament person of Isaiah's day might have understood it, we are hard pressed to see how anyone could see in Isaiah's words a clear prophecy of the birth of Jesus Christ. The context of Isaiah 7 would, in fact, suggest that the child Immanuel was to be a sign in Isaiah's own day to the then reigning monarch, King Ahaz. When Matthew cites that passage he is giving a second meaning of the prophecy, one which "fulfils" the original meaning, or in other words, fills the original prophecy full of new meaning. Matthew's use of the term "fulfil" is a matter to which I shall return later (see chapter 7), but the point we need to make here is that to find out what Matthew meant we must read Matthew; to find out what Isaiah meant we must read Isaiah.

That conservative Christians have often opposed this principle either consciously or unconsciously, is illustrated by the fact that when the Revised Standard Version of the Old Testament was first published, considerable opposition arose in connection with its treatment of Isaiah 7:14. The King James Version had used the term "virgin" in Isaiah 7:14 as well as in Matthew 1:23; thus the language of the "prophecy" and "fulfillment" matched up quite nicely. But the RSV translators rightly retained "virgin" in Matthew while choosing to use "young woman" in Isaiah, a term which more accurately reflects the Hebrew original. In fact, there is a beautiful ambiguity about the Hebrew word *almah*, which allows both the original application in Isaiah's day and the secondary and more complete application to Mary the mother of Jesus. Yet the RSV translators were accused of tampering with the doctrine of the Virgin Birth by their translation of Isaiah.irate Christians staged Bible burning parties in protest, evidence enough that feelings were strong.

This is not the place for an extensive study of the way in which the New Testament treats the Old Testament. But the examples we have cited illustrate the freedom which generally characterizes the style of the New Testament writers. I do not want to deny the biblical writers this freedom in interpreting and applying other biblical material, but I am concerned lest that freedom, originally a result of the Spirit's movement, should become an excuse for evading our responsibility to come to God's word, seeking a fresh knowledge of his will under the guidance of his Spirit.

When we allow all the writers to speak for themselves we have taken a significant step towards relieving some of the problems that arise out of the differences between the Old Testament and the New. Scripture is much more like the full rich harmony of an orchestra than the single monotone blast from a trumpet. The many instruments, the different tones and harmonics, can symbolize the great variety of methods that God has used to work with humanity. As circumstances change, as people grow or degenerate, God moulds his message to the needs of the hour. For a people long enslaved in a pagan culture, the Sinai revelation was just what was needed—a little thunder and smoke to catch their attention. But as time went on, a fresh revelation became necessary to correct certain misconceptions about God and to shed fresh light on the path of his people. The beauty of that fresh revelation of God in Jesus Christ is something very precious to all who call themselves Christians. But if we should be tempted to look only to this new revelation, we must then remind ourselves that Jesus himself made the startling claim that his Father was the God of the Old Testament, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. And

that was not all, for the Gospel of John suggests that Jesus himself was so bold as to claim that he was the great I AM, the God of Abraham (John 8:58). Thus there is no question that the two Testaments do belong together. But having said that, we must recognize that there are still two Testaments, each with its own particular message for us. So why should we allow the one to obscure the beauty and the truth of the other.