

Exploring the Old Testament

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In the introduction to *Theology and the University* John Coulson writes, '... we ask for a laity better educated in their religion.' The Old Testament is the soil from which that religion sprang: it will not be necessary to have to justify its inclusion in any syllabus for lay religious education. Anyone who honestly tries to penetrate into a field of study quickly realises how vast it is and how little he knows about it: this is particularly true of the Old Testament, but before I say why I think this is so I want to tell you why I am speaking to you about it. It is not because I claim any particular knowledge of the Old Testament but because I am a student of it and have tried to teach others about it, from eleven-year olds to theological students and ordinary lay people. I find the exploration of the Old Testament a fascinating and exciting process and a valuable one worth the effort it involves. I believe this experience lies at the heart of being a student and it is the only claim I make on your attention. I hope that what I have to say may help you to penetrate further into the Old Testament.

There are three obvious difficulties which the Old Testament presents to anyone trying to penetrate into it. First, there is its sheer historical size. In written documents alone it spans a period of at least a thousand years, and, as we are beginning to see more clearly, behind those written documents there is a carefully guarded oral tradition which preserves the people's experiences of events long before any document we now have. In terms of our own culture this would represent the best of English literature from the time of Alfred and the people's experiences from the departure of the Romans. We come to the Bible expecting it to give us a clear, uniform and coherent description of God and his work for his people, instead we find inconsistency and incompleteness and ragged edges—at any rate in the Old Testament part of it.

Secondly, as if this were not enough, there is the complication that all this belongs to an historical period and a geographical situation very different from our own. Economically and culturally the people of the Old Testament are remote. Their very language, so different in structure and conceptual pattern from ours, should warn us of the dangers of thinking they are just like us—only dressed a little differently. Their

differences penetrate into every corner of their lives. It is an agricultural economy to an extent we find difficult to imagine, where the failure of the harvest brought starvation and national disaster, where the yield of corn and wine and oil were the intense concern of everyone and a powerful motive for worship. The only parallel of which I have experience is the way a small island of the West Indies may depend on the sugar crop or the yield of nutmeg; or there is the evidence, nearer to hand, of the effects the failure of the potato crop had on Ireland in the last century. We are industrial, internationally minded, literate, mobile; these people were agricultural, parochial in their interests, largely illiterate and tended to stay in the district where they were born. It does not make it any easier for us to understand them.

Again, their experience is very different from most English people. For most of their history the people of the Old Testament were subjected to foreign occupation or to such pressure from outside that it coloured all their lives. They lived astride the only practicable route between the two great centres of civilisation and power, Egypt and Mesopotamia, and while this brought some wealth to them through trade it also brought the depredations of marching armies and all the anxiety of a small nation unsure which powerful nation to placate. Both alliance and conquest carried the obligation to adopt the worship of ally or conqueror with all its implications of arousing the anger of the jealous God of Israel. Perhaps in this country we are now becoming familiar with the experience of living with neighbours more powerful than ourselves, but it is nine hundred years since we experienced foreign invasion and occupation and all the problems it presents. Yet these are the problems which were the opportunity for the Hebrews to grow in the knowledge of their God.

Finally, and most subtle difficulty of all, there is the problem that the Hebrew knowledge of God is presented to us through the actions and reactions of people. This, rather than the size or the geographical and historical remoteness of the Old Testament is the main problem and the one which must determine our approach to it. The temptation is always to oversimplify and abstract from the complex whole of personal action, and to try to force from it all simple answers to our present-day problems. The Old Testament does contain codes of law, but it is far more than a statute book, and it is certainly not a statute book by which we are necessarily bound. There may have been a time when it was the divine will that houses be built with a parapet round their roofs (as Deuteronomy commands), but it does not indicate a pagan minister of

housing in this present day if he ignores this in his planning regulations. More seriously, one can think of many instances where fragments of the Old Testament, torn from their context, are quoted as if they were the final authority on Sunday sport or total abstinence.

There is also the danger that although the Old Testament contains a lot of ideas, propositions—truths, if you like—about God (and we are going to look at some of them in a moment), it is still very far from being a theological treatise, and if it is treated as one its witness to the omnipotent God of love who acts for the salvation of his people will escape us. At best the understanding of God shown in the Old Testament is a limited one, as might be expected of a society with a slave structure and polygamy, and it is significant that present-day societies with discriminatory social systems tend to draw their theology from the Old Testament, not the New.

All through, the Old Testament is about men and women who are living with God—whether they like it or not—and its prime purpose is to relate what happened as a result of this, what happened when men found God was part of their environment, part of their lives and someone no more to be ignored than an influential neighbour or a powerful ally or a potentially dangerous Assyrian or Egyptian monarch. He was intimately woven into the fabric of their lives, and whether or not the emerging pattern was to their liking God was part of it. This is true of every level of complexity to be found in the nation: king, priest, merchant, shepherd, pampered courtesan and wretched slave: all knew it, and his presence affected the organisation of every group and their interrelations, whether the whole nation, or the city or family, or the solitary landless stranger.

We are concerned with discovering what we can of this God, but the knowledge to be gained of him from the Old Testament is essentially *mediated* knowledge, knowledge mediated to us through other people's experiences. If we are to gain this knowledge we must enter their lives, think with their thoughts, feel with their feelings and see their world through their eyes. There is a passage in Fr Davis's paper in *Theology and the University* where this point is made well. He says,

I come now to the final quality I see theology as needing today: an existential character. (You will be as relieved as I am to know that he goes on to say what he means by this!) Perhaps I had better first explain what I mean by this vogue word which has not gained in clarity by its popularity. By 'existential' I mean what concerns or involves human existence in the concrete. I call a truth 'existential'

when I cannot assent to it as a mere spectator or disinterested thinker but only by committing my whole existence. When I ask for theology to be more 'existential', I am pleading for a greater awareness that it is about a message of salvation that affects man in his total existence and that, consequently, can only be studied with commitment. As applied to the study of the Old Testament this calls for the most difficult of faculties: compassion, sympathy. Yet it is essential. God reveals himself in people's lives and we must penetrate those lives in order to receive the revelation.

This act of penetration, of sympathy, is difficult, but not difficult to the point of impossibility, for alongside the people's experience of God, and both sharing in it and at the same time aware of it, are the prophets. Indeed, 'sharing in it' is too feeble an expression to use: they are focal points of that experience, points where the experience of God is most intense, and at the same time they are articulate. They are aware of God's activity, they explore it and its consequences, and they express their observations in writing or recorded speech. And we have their observations; we can view their situation through their eyes and with their understanding of it.

There is much misunderstanding about the prophets and the prophetic writings. Certainly by New Testament times they are mainly thought of as foretellers, men who could see into the future and discover what was going to happen, men who could foresee events. Their writings were explored, and indeed all the Old Testament writings, for predictions, and their fulfilment was read into every kind of happening. They were treated as the key to the significance of events, whether at the national or the individual level, occurring hundreds of years after their own times. And I suspect that much of this attitude to the Old Testament remains with us: a sort of ancient Old Moore's Almanac whose main predictions were proved true by the New Testament events. If this is true, if we have this attitude, we are cutting ourselves off—and those we teach—from a great area of revelation, from God's activity experienced, observed and recorded, during two thousand years.

The prophets are indeed the key, but the key to their own times, not the future. They are men not with foresight but with insight, insight into their own times and their own people, and moreover men who see it all with God's eyes. They are almost all of them deeply involved in the situation, yet they are sufficiently detached to be able to judge and direct it, and the judgements they form and the pressures they bring to bear are of God. Call this, if you wish, the knowledge of God, only do

not think of it as a set of theological propositions, a system of clearly analysed, connected truths neatly laid out ready for teaching. We shall only learn from it all if we are successful in penetrating their situation, and we shall only do *that* if we use the prophets' communicated experience as our point of entry. This is not easy, but once done it gives us the freedom of a world where God is clearly active and recognised, and it will help us to recognise and respond to that same God's activity and demands in our own times.

What, then, do we find if we penetrate into this ancient community who worshipped the God whom we worship and who, in the end, produced the generation which said, 'Be it unto me according to thy word'?

The most important thing we find is a community, or rather a complex of communities centred on the family. The family looms so large in the individual's life, and extends over so wide an area, that it is not easy to see how far individual responsibility (as we understand it) is even recognised until comparatively late in the national development, possibly not even until the Babylonian exile. The individual is constituted by the web of relationships of which he is a part, and particularly the complex of blood relationships which goes to make up a family. Apart from this complex the individual person can hardly be said to have existence—certainly he does not have much character, as is shown by the unhappy position of 'the stranger within thy gate', the foreigner who is cut off from the life of the village community not because he is poor but because he is outside the complex of blood relationships by which the village is made. So strong is this sense of continuity and fulfilment in the family that it seems to satisfy the need for the assurance of survival after death, the need normally met by belief in immortality. The Hebrew belief in personal survival after death is at best vague and shadowy, precisely because they felt that need was met in the continuity of the family. For example, Absalom's tragedy is that he dies without an heir, so he erects a pillar in the Valley of Kings, not to commemorate any particular deed or event in his life but because he had no son 'by which his name might be brought to remembrance', that is, in whom his personality, his being, might continue. A man is immortal in his descendants, in his family.

Again, with our strong sense of personal justice, we are deeply shocked by the punishment of a man's relations for the crime the man alone has committed. Achan, 'son of Zabdi, son of Zerah, of the tribe of Judah' (and notice how he is defined by his place in his family) kept back some of the loot taken at the fall of Jericho, and in the end admits it to Joshua

with what I think we would call penitence. There is no hint that any of the family are involved in this: 'Of a truth I have sinned against the Lord, the God of Israel, and thus and thus have I done.' Yet the whole family is punished: 'And Joshua, and all Israel with him, took Achan the son of Zerah, . . . and his sons, and his daughters, and his oxen, and his asses, and his sheep, and his tent, and all that he had . . . and they burned them with fire, and stoned them with stones . . . and the Lord turned away the fierceness of his anger.' Very primitive and unjust it seems to us of the twentieth century, yet I suspect that a Hebrew would be as deeply shocked—and I make no judgement about this—by our readiness to tolerate loneliness and isolation in our cities, and the aged members of our families sent off to old people's homes and geriatric units. My concern is not to judge which is the more civilised, only to point out that this sense of community is a vital element in their religious experience in a way which is no longer true of ours.

For the units of which their community was built were not so much individual persons as families, and the centre of unity in the family, the defining element, was the father, the patriarch. In the literal biological sense he was the creator of the family, of course, particularly when we remember that these people believed that all the semen of subsequent generations was physically present in the father and passed on by him to his sons. But the father is not just the physical originator of his family, he is the continual source of their existence, the presiding centre of their lives, the focus about whom their everyday activity moves, and his blessing is a necessary source of well-being and power. Is it then surprising that their experience of God should be organised by the concept of fatherhood? And not merely of a father as the originator, the begetter, of mankind—far more importantly God was seen as the continual creator of their well-being, the essential centre of their communal activity, the ever-present head of the national family, the continual source of their peace. Their thinking is above all concrete, and God is above all the vital, concrete, all-important centre of their lives. Only secondarily is he the creator of the world, and so far as one can tell this idea is quite late in the development of their thought—and even then it only comes as a setting for his position as the father of Israel, the creator of the chosen people and their defender in their times of danger. There is an almost sublime arrogance, for example, about the psalmist who, when singing of the mighty acts of God ('For his mercy endureth for ever'), mentions in the same breath the creation of the universe and the escape from Egypt:

Who alone doeth great wonders;
 Who by understanding made the heavens;
 Who spread forth the earth above the waters;
 Who made great lights:
 The sun to rule by day,
 The moon and stars to rule by night;
 Who smote Egypt in their first born,
 And brought out Israel from among them,
 With a strong hand and a stretched out arm . . .

Yet arrogant though it may seem, it does at least testify to their sense of the active, creative presence of God in their midst, and it is this which lies at the heart of the concept of the covenant. It is a pity that word has to be used, for to us it carries the idea of an agreement, an arrangement of mutual benefits and obligations, almost a business deal, and this the Hebrew covenant certainly was not. It was essentially the expression of God's initiative in choosing, protecting, guiding and, when needed, punishing this people. Indeed, not merely of choosing them—for that gives the impression that they were already there to be chosen—but of making them a people and filling them with his life. 'You shall be my people and I will be your God', the promise is made and repeated from Abraham right through to David, and its meaning is explored and taught by the prophets from Amos right through to the great anonymous poet who speaks from the end of the exile in Babylon and whose work is to be found in the second half of the book of Isaiah.

The prophetic penetration of the richness of the mystery of the covenant was a slow process, each man digging further into the area others had opened up and adding his own perceptions. Amos realised that God demanded of his people his own standards of righteousness, like a builder holding a plumbline against a wall and ruthlessly destroying whatever was found leaning to one side. Hosea, from the experience of his own disastrous marriage and his continued love of a wife who had deserted him and on whom he could not bring himself to call down the wrath of the law, saw that God would remain faithful and steadfast and compassionate and ready to forgive no matter how his people betrayed his love to other Gods and flocked to the local fertility rites. The covenant initiative of God towards his people is an unchangingly sure and secure foundation which will never fail them. Isaiah appealed to this sure and living presence of God at a moment of intense national danger, and saw his advice ignored and the first moves made towards inevitable disaster. The living presence can bring judgement as well as

secure peace, and Emmanuel's land be overwhelmed by the flood it has evoked and released. And so with all of them, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, the second Isaiah and the host of lesser names; they are all men who are deeply conscious of the covenanted presence of God amongst his people, and who see the consequences of this for the men of their time. God is in their midst and active, and he acts of his own initiative and not for any merit the nation may be able to claim. He acts because he is God and wishes to make himself known to his world, and these men and women are the medium through which his revelation is declared. In them God is to be found. This is nowhere more clearly stated than in the passages when Ezekiel, exiled with his people in Babylon, tells of the coming restoration of the nation and the return to Jerusalem:

Therefore say unto the house of Israel, Thus saith the Lord God: I do not this for your sake, O house of Israel, but for mine holy name, which ye have profaned among the nations, whither ye went. And I will sanctify my great name, which hath been profaned among the nations, which ye have profaned in the midst of them; and the nations shall know that I am the Lord, saith the Lord God, when I shall be sanctified in you before their eyes. For I will take you from among the nations, and gather you out of all the countries, and will bring you into your own land. And I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean: from all your filthiness, and from all your idols, will I cleanse you.

God indeed acts in these people, but it is action which stems solely from the all-powerful, ever-generous heart of God. It springs from love, not the mere honouring of a contract.

God's action for the cleansing and restoring of his chosen people, and through them, of the world, springs from love, yet the results are dependant on the people's response. The omnipotent God of creation works through the response his love evokes in his people, and at every point in the nation's history, at every moment in the individual's life, there is a tension between God's action and the response to it. This tension finds expression in the emergence of a remnant, an Israel within Israel, in whom God finds the response of love. God's presence brings judgement as well as salvation, and both judgement and salvation alike result from the kind of response the presence evokes:

He came unto his own and his own received him not. But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God. The most conspicuous aspect of the failure was the refusal to accept their missionary vocation. God intended that they should be the bridge-

head from which he would reach out into his world, the centre of salvation to which the nations would be drawn. But the Hebrews were too concerned with their own domestic affairs to be able to look outwards, and their missionary vocation dies as all their energy is directed towards the preservation of the purity of the centre. There is a real failure of nerve here, a refusal to take risks, to become contaminated, and they retreat into the self-protective mentality of men under siege. They are sure that God will protect them, and that the millenium will prove them right in the face of their enemies, so meanwhile they just sit and wait.

I have said nothing about the fulfilment of the Old Testament in the New, the consummation of the Hebrew experience of God in the Christian revelation. This is deliberate. That fulfilment is, of course, of vital importance. The Hebrew awareness of the dynamic presence of their God in their midst comes to its completion in the incarnation, and all the strands of Old Testament experience meet and make sense at this point. Again, that same divine presence continues to act in the Christian community, the Church, the body of Christ new born in him and extended and sustained and expressed in the eucharistic sacrifice. All this is indeed true, but our problem is mainly one of method, of approach, of attitude to the Old Testament. If we concentrate on its fulfilment in Christianity we shall miss the living truth the Old Testament people experienced. They were not *just* preparing the world for Christ: they were urgently trying to satisfy the living needs of each generation as they arose; they were desperately seeking solutions to their own grave problems. It was no solution to those problems to be told it would all come right in some indefinite future. We catch something of this intensity of concern in words of Jeremiah spoken at a moment of deep crisis and failure:

The harvest is past,
The summer is ended,
And we are not saved.

For the hurt of the daughter of my people am I hurt:
I am in mourning; astonishment hath taken hold on me.
Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there?

Why then is not the health of the daughter of my people recovered? The summer is ended and we are not saved. Jeremiah is speaking for his own generation and speaking with urgency. It is this that we must experience, this urgency, if we are to penetrate into the Old Testament experience of God.

What then of the teacher? How are we to approach our pupils in this exploration of the Old Testament?

First, and vitally so, we must treat our pupils as equals, people whose insights are real and valid, whose views command respect. I learned this lesson myself the hard way, with a class of eleven-year-olds in Trinidad who saw far further than ever I had into the delicate relationships and love between Paul and Philemon and the escaped slave Onesimus. Teaching our pupils we must approach them as students amongst students and equals before the God whose love we are exploring together.

Secondly, we must not be afraid to let them see that we are committed Christians for whom all this is important. I am sure we have none of us forgotten this in our hearts, but it is valuable to remind ourselves from time to time of Religious Instruction periods taken by uncertain, sceptical teachers; periods which degenerate into convenient gaps useful for collecting milk money or issuing stationery or filling in the register. Religious Instruction should stretch us to our limits and leave the group with questions which excite both teacher and pupil and which demand concern. We shall only communicate the urgency of it all if we feel it ourselves.

Thirdly, we must know from our own knowledge that the Old Testament experience is relevant, for it is the same God active in love both in their lives and in ours, and we must be prepared to explore this relevance with our pupils. This could be embarrassing, for the relevance extends right into the depths of our secular lives, of our public worship and of our prayers, and we shall certainly find we are learning more than we are teaching. A great deal turns on how far there is mutual confidence between ourselves and our pupils, but where this exists the possibilities are endless. It takes a peculiar kind of courage to talk about your own personal prayers, and how they may grow out of penetration into a biblical situation, to a group you have been teaching arithmetic to a few minutes before, but once achieved it will open up vast areas of the experience of God—both for teacher and pupil.

It was John Coulson whom I first heard use the expression 'rehearsal community'. School, university, even the family, all these are rehearsal communities for the love of God. They are places where we have the opportunity to explore something of the love of God and learn about its operation, protected places where we can be guided and directed and helped before we push off on our own and assume full adult responsibilities in the great community. We who teach have grave responsibilities

in rehearsal communities. They are places where the love of God is tested, explored, experienced, proved; places where it has room to grow. This must govern all our study of the Old Testament, for the Old Testament is precisely about this: a place and time where God's love was revealed, explored, tested, and for all the failure did in fact take root in men's hearts.

New Testament Studies

J. L. HOULDEN

It may be no accident that the examiners in the Honour School of Theology at Oxford commonly find that the worst performance in the examination is in the paper on the Four Gospels. If this is a symptom that candidates approach that paper with a certain diffidence, it is not too difficult to find an explanation. For among all the subjects which are usually included under the term 'theology', the study of the New Testament and in particular the study of the gospels is the one where the committed Christian is likely to find both his chief joys and his deepest sorrows. We hope to indicate the joys before we have finished, but we shall begin with the sorrows.

I ought to modify my statement about the peculiarly difficult nature of New Testament studies for the committed Christian by limiting it mainly to those who are of historical or literary bent. The more philosophically minded student will find his toughest challenge in the questions of natural theology. But Christianity being the religion that it is, no seriously inquiring Christians can evade the questions: What exactly happened in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, and what precisely was the first evaluation of those happenings? If, to put it at its worst, it would be decisively shown that nothing happened or that nothing happened which could bear the weight which St Paul, for example, put upon it, the dogmatic theologian would find the ground moved from beneath his feet and his tower turned to solid ivory.

The study of the gospels constitutes a point of unease not only in the setting of theology in its widest sense but also within the Bible itself.