

ANOTHER THING

THE OLD TESTAMENT

We read the Old Testament at the beginning of the Liturgy of the Word. It is the least familiar part of the Bible to most Catholics. There is a certain confusion about our attitude to it which comes from the history of the Church.

Christianity began as a Jewish sect. It focused its religious attention on a Jewish teacher, Jesus, whose contribution was a prophetic call to Jewish people to be converted to the faith of their fathers. The authority he claimed for his call was widely seen as unprecedented, and resulted in his arraignment for blasphemy, of which he was convicted and for which he was sentenced to death by his own people and executed (by others). Thus from the beginning the people from which Jesus was born - whose national religious library the Old Testament is - appeared in the rôle of his enemies. Their attempts to oppose and extinguish his following were sustained, but unsuccessful; and their own national extinction at the hands of the Romans (AD 70) was interpreted in Christian circles as a punishment from God for their refusal of Jesus. Thus for many Christians the very name of Jew became synonymous with words like *deicide* (God-killer), *unbeliever*, and *traitor*. The figure of Judas came to stand as the symbolic Jewish figure in the Passion story: the other apostles being mentally converted into Christians. The liturgy even included the phrase *perfidious Jews*.

This interpretation of history was badly flawed, forgetting that the historical Jesus of Nazareth shows no sign of wanting to abolish the Jewish religion. He lived and died a Jew, and saw the salvation of the world as responding perfectly to God's initiative towards the Jews. He only recruited Jews, and only sent them to address Jews. It is possible that he saw his life's work as a Jewish project. For him, "the Bible" meant the Old Testament. This is principally the reason why we read the Old Testament. It is the Bible Jesus read. Its law is the law he came to fulfil, and its prayer book (the Psalter) was his prayer book. He formed his religious outlook from it, and we who claim to follow his footsteps are called to do the same. We do not believe that the word of God spoken in the Old Testament has been annulled or superseded. In Jesus this Word finds the perfection of its fulfilment, and that is enough to make our own listening to the Old Testament vitally necessary if we are to understand Jesus.

The Jewish authorities could make life very unpleasant for Jewish Christians. To be excommunicated from the synagogue left you without a place to stand in the Roman Empire. If you had been disowned by the Jews, you would be expected to conform to the general religious system of the empire, and to display your loyalty to the Emperor by offering incense to his divinised image. This a Christian could not do, and many died as suspected subversives or traitors because of this. By the time the Fourth Gospel came to be written Jerusalem had fallen, and the greatest disaster Jewish people could have imagined - the total destruction of their Temple and their national life - had happened. Relations between the synagogue and the infant Church were now non-existent, and the picture of the Jews painted by the Fourth Gospel is a demonised one. Jesus himself addresses them as "you Jews", as if he were not himself Jewish, and calls them *spawn*

of Satan. In such circumstances the Jewish scriptures were unlikely to receive the reverence they merit. Internecine feud is no place for fruitful theological dialogue.

Whatever the Church's *official* position, the practical consequences of these historical developments were considerable. Firstly, tremendous attention was given to the four Gospels as the heart of revelation, and the fact of the Crucifixion was sometimes seen as disqualifying Jewish words and thoughts: few friendly contacts ever took place between Jewish and Christian scholars, let alone ordinary believers, who felt that if the Old Testament occasionally managed to bear witness to truth it was in a way that was probably concealed from its own authors. Christian preachers trawled the words of the prophets with especial attention, seeking for traces of the Gospels; when found, they were adduced as proof-texts. The theory was that God had given hints in advance of the Messianic future he alone could see; a huge collection of such texts was mined, and taken together this vast battery of evidence only reinforced the sad but commonly-voiced conclusion that the Jewish refusal of Jesus amounted to wilful malice, culpable ignorance.

The organic unity between the Old and New Testaments was accordingly either lost to view or downplayed, with the Old appearing only to ground or reinforce the Gospel; the notion of Israel standing for all humanity before God was submerged in the Church's consciousness of having severed itself from Judaism. The general Jewish fear and refusal of all things Gentile was consecrated in the experience of persecution to the death at Jerusalem and later experiences like the symbolic holocaust at Masada. As the Roman world converted to Christianity, the polarity rapidly became religious, and the lines of anti-Semitism were already to be discerned.

It is in contact with the Old Testament that the Christian needs to understand the historical nature of our faith. In order to understand what we believe, we need to have historical awareness. Christians are used to saying this about Jesus: that he was truly born and truly taught and healed, was tried, convicted and handed over to be killed, that he suffered death and was buried in an earthly tomb, that he truly rose from the dead - these are the heart of the Creed. But a view of the great historic sweep of religious evolution, to which the Old Testament can bear convincing witness, is something which only returned to the light relatively recently.