

# THE CONTEMPORARY ADDRESS OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

One key address of the Old Testament to contemporary churchgoers and skeptics alike has to do with what it means to have “faith in God.”

## Faith in God

Most contemporary practitioners of a Christian religion understand “faith in God” to mean holding beliefs of some sort—perhaps a set of doctrines, or having a theological position, or at least knowing a true morality that clarifies right and wrong. We even use “having a faith” to mean having some sort of religious or spirit practice.

In the core message of the Old Testament, however, having faith in God means *action*—a response of the whole person or the whole community in the actual flow of time and aimed at results. Faith in God means packing up a bag of possessions and your children and following Moses out of Egyptian slavery into a desert and living there for forty years—working Egyptian culture out of your bones and replacing that mode of life with a singular obedience to Profound Reality.

Faith in God means gathering with thousands at the edge of the River Jordan for a re-covenanting for a new life—crossing this river holding up babies and swords out the water, and camping on the other side, making final preparations for conquering a place for yourselves among already warring factions.

Faith in God means hearing prophet after prophet challenge you to give up some familiar way of life and attempt something better. Faith in God means persistence in preserving the lessons of the past and building new lessons never recorded before.

*Faith in God means action—action of the whole person or the whole community in the actual flow of contemporary time.*

## The Temporality of Morality

It is not true that the Old Testament is basically a law book, a rule book, a guide book for our moral lives. It is true that four out of the first five books of the Bible are almost nothing but laws. The book of Exodus is at least half about Moses as law-giver. Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy are almost entirely laws, rules, norms, customs, and morality. We are right to be bored and often critical of what we find there. These books are not guidelines for our moral and ethical lives today. They are a record of the ever-changing moral implications of living one's faith in Profound Reality in real situations. These Old Testament situations no longer exist.

What we might learn from this vast sea of teachings is how to create laws, morality, and norms for our own social situations today. We find nothing in these books about the use of nuclear energy or the avoidance of nuclear war. We find nothing about handling a climate crisis that could end life as we know it.

And Moses did not write all five of these books as some traditions imply. If these books can be called "books of Moses," it is only in the sense that the inspiration of Moses about law-writing was reasserted over the period of about eight hundred years that it took to write these five books.

All this was law-writing for different historical situations. Every new situation requires a new set of laws, norms, moralities, customs, or advisements. No law or morality drops down from heaven, or grows up from nature, or is a set of justice statements found in some idea world. Moses did not impose absolute laws on his community. He invented new laws and customs within the context of being loyal to an Eternal Mystery that continued to judge and inspire his understandings and efforts toward best-case behaviors.

*Until we see the human nature of all morality, we have no hope of understanding or respecting these primal books of the Old Testament or making use of them for our own moral efforts.* Such as:

## **The End of Patriarchy**

In spite of the fact that all the Old Testament lessons about faith in God are embedded in patriarchal and hierarchal social forms, living exodus-wise today

includes an exodus from the patriarchal social forms that we have inherited. Enacting the exodus faith today also includes forging post-patriarchal modes of sociality in both our secular patterns and our religious fabrics.

Let us not overlook the fact that many of our prominent feminists are also some manner of Christian or Jew. (An increasing number of Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists and others are also catching the flame of the feminist opposition to the patriarchal pasts of all our longstanding religious documents.)

The post-patriarchal turn in time is a fresh prophetic call from that Profound Reality that we meet in the flow of history. *Today, faith in God includes being a feminist*, whatever our own personal gender may be. Feminism is a new prophetic edge of the commands of Profound Reality. How do we know that? Our God-devotion to Profound Reality says so through the events of our actual lives.

## **Ecology**

The Old Testament texts, properly understood, support the call for love of the human body and a love for the natural world. That nature is seen as the creation of God is a statement of affirmation of nature and implies responsibility for nature by humans.. The first chapter of Genesis and many of the psalms are especially clear about loving this Earth. .No support is given in these old texts for our arrogant longing for escape from material existence, or to justify our technological overpowering of nature or for our wasting and polluting natural places and resources.

Even those passages that speak of God giving to the human dominion of the fish of the sea, the birds of their and the cattle etc were making nothing but factual statements that honored the human.. My grandmother knew she had dominion over the fish and turtles in the nearby creek. With a cane pole and hook she taught me that dominion. These Old Testament passages said nothing about dominion over the whales or about killing off all the fish in a section of the ocean. Reading what we want to believe into these texts is a favorite trick of those who want to rebel from the truth that might be found in these OT texts.

Religious philosophers have been right when they have said that Judaism and Christianity are among the most “materialistic” of all religions. This is only true, however, if “materialistic” means “down to Earth,” rather than simply having more money and more things. A love of the natural Earth is totally consistent with a love of the Profound Reality that is permanently beyond our grasp yet meets us in the wonders of nature.

*Ecological commitment is supported, not opposed, by a clear grasp of the Old Testament view of faithfulness to Profound Reality.* It is also true that a literalization of the supernatural poetry of the Old Testament tempts us to an anti-ecological attitude that demeans our temporal life and excuses us from responsibility for the temporal life we meet here and now on planet Earth.

### **Clear Communication**

The Old Testament also tells us something about the use of words as healing agents. The psalm writers and prophets have composed poetry that, when reworded only slightly for our time, is as good as any word-smithing in the history of language. We can learn how best to proclaim the deep truths of which language is capable by reading these very old texts.

In conclusion, here is the understanding of the Old Testament that I propose that we thinking Christians take toward these texts: *The Old Testament texts are Christian scripture, and there can be no future for a viable and vital Christian practice without an inclusion of these texts, understood in a contemporary fashion.*

The above thoughts in this essay also appear in my book *The Thinking Christian* page 160, in chapter 10 “Rereading the Old Testament.” Chapter 10 appears in the second part of this three-part book—Part One is on a more vivid grasp of religion in general. Part Two is on methods and illustrations of Christian theologizing for this period of time. And Part Three is on the social implications of this understanding of faith in God for Christian ethics and communal life. This book is a pull-together of about 67 years of grappling with these topics. Get an e-book or a paperback of *The Thinking Christian* from Amazon or the publisher Wipf and Stock. Gene W. Marshall