# THE METHOD OF THE WRITER TO THE HEBREWS IN USING OLD TESTAMENT QUOTATIONS

The Epistle to the Hebrews is a masterpiece of condensed reference, and throws light on our proper attitude to the writings of the Old Testament. The quotations found in it, and the manner in which they are used, reveal the author to have been to a peculiar degree a man of full mind, and one capable of grasping an intricate sequence of events. At first sight it might seem that his quotations from the Old Testament have only a superficial verbal allusion to some leading word like " Son " or " Father " or " angel ", and to be strung out in a series by way of argumentative repetition; but closer consideration of them will show that, so far from being " proof-texts " only, they are used as clues or hints to some extended historical situation in the Old Testament with an important bearing on the general argument of the epistle. This literary device—of securing maximum of meaning with economy of word—is in keeping with the studied structure of the book and the author's rich verbal handling of his material.

The initial impulse that led him to these fruitful trains of thought seems to have come from close reflection upon the language of the Psalms, from which book many of his quotations are taken. He likewise frequently quotes the book of Genesis, but—and here is the point—he reaches Genesis *through* the Psalms. Moreover, this pattern of research is followed also when quoting from other books in the Old Testament. An interpretative utterance from the prophets is made to serve as an index to earlier historical writings, which thereupon are expounded from that new angle. His range of reference, too, is remarkable, though like a wise author he confines himself for the most part to one or two specific books, notably, as already mentioned, that of Genesis. He is, as he tells us, writing " in few words " (xiii. 22), and will not weaken what he has to say by over-diffusion. In other words, though he could say much more, he prefers not to labour the point and weary his readers! Nevertheless, in spite of himself, copious allusive references peep out here and there, and his eleventh chapter shows that he had in mind the whole scope of the Old Testament, including the books of the prophets, from which (elsewhere) he quotes only sparingly: he even

takes an oblique glance in the direction of the times of the Maccabees. A further strand in the pattern is the way in which, by such reference, he skilfully introduces Old Testament messianic persons into his thesis, sometimes openly, sometimes in more veiled fashion, as we shall see later.

It might be well at this point to enumerate some of these quotations that serve to introduce historical scenes from earlier Scriptures.

> Thou art my Son;
> This day have I begotten thee (Ps. ii. 7, quoted Heb. i. 5).

While undoubtedly messianic, as the parallel quotation in Acts xiii. 33 proves, the Psalm itself is coloured by David's own history in the conquest of Zion and the subduing of the nations round about Israel. Being so, it points us back to the histories of the books of Samuel, and at the same time becomes an apt prophecy of messianic rule.

> Thy throne, O God, is for ever and ever;
> A sceptre of equity is the sceptre of thy kingdom.
> Thou hast loved righteousness, and hated wickedness:
> Therefore God, thy God, hath anointed thee
> With the oil of gladness above thy fellows (Ps. xlv. 6 f., quoted Heb. i. 8 f.).

The fit interpretation of the Psalm as messianic does not exclude an original historical circumstance which led to its being composed. What that contemporary event was we are not told, but the Psalm clearly bears the marks of some specific occasion. The precise geographical reference and other allusive clauses are not mere literary ornament. But the august form of address in verse 6 to the Subject of the Psalm, " Thy throne, O God," makes it applicable, *in a unique sense*, to Christ. Quotation, however, by the writer to the Hebrews would seem to include an intentional, though here indeterminate, historical reference (cf. Ps. lxxxii. 1, 6).

> Of old hast thou laid the foundation of the earth:
> And the heavens are the work of thy hands.
> They shall perish, but thou shalt endure:
> Yea, all of them shall wax old like a garment:
> And as a vesture shalt thou change them, and they shall be changed:
> But thou art the same,
> And thy years shall have no end (Ps. cii. 25–27, quoted Heb. i. 10-12).

This echoes the opening verses of Genesis, and so refers us to the record of the history of creation. Its use in Hebrews widens for readers of the epistle the Old Testament background to

his argument. Linked here with Christ it implies what is elsewhere plainly declared, that all things were created through Him, and that He Himself is the uncreated ever-existing LORD.

> The Lord saith unto my lord,
> Sit thou at my right hand,
> Until I make thine enemies thy footstool (Ps. cx. 1 f., quoted Heb. i. 13).

Here again King David recognizes that his own office and conquests only pointed forward—as his "last words" show (2 Sam. xxiii. 1–5)—to a Greater than himself, in whom the divine kingship would find true realization. Yet the relationship implicit in the words "my lord" gives David's own position an honoured place in Scripture. Putting ourselves back into the time when the Psalm was written, we cannot now read it without in measure thinking of the whole earlier history of David himself. All this wealth of reference, however allusively indicated, surely lies behind the quotation.

At this point it may be objected to by some that such rich signification is merely incidental, not the direct outcome of intention on the part of the writer. Later quotations, however, make it clear that this is not so. In Heb. iii. 7–11, after quoting Ps. xcv. 7–11, and resuming it (clause by clause) throughout chapters iii and iv, he commences a dissertation thereon by going back to the historical incidents in the book of Numbers (upon which the Psalm is based), bringing in Joshua also from a later period, and going still further back to the institution of the Sabbath in Eden, as recorded in the book of Genesis. Here is Biblical exposition on a worthy scale! The method here so patently followed surely justifies the interpretation given the quotations already enumerated.

Similarly, meditation on the sudden isolated reference in Ps. cx. 4 to Melchizedek leads to the discovery of fresh and hidden meanings in the account in Genesis. In this instance he goes on to quote, in his seventh chapter, the text of the historical portion in Genesis, and to follow this by an exposition packed with condensed meaning. Moreover, this is no haphazard unpremeditated quotation: until he reaches this decisive passage in chapter vii, the words "a priest . . . after the order of Melchizedek" ring out in succession like a herald's trumpet, in earlier chapters (Heb. v. 6, 10; vi. 20).

Again, in chapter x, basing his argument on the words of Ps. xl. 6–8, he uses this passage to throw light upon the whole system of sacrifices under the law, as prescribed in the book of

Leviticus: this, if not a strictly historical reference, at least looks back to historical ceremonies and would have had historical tradition for a Jewish mind. A like method of tracing earlier beginnings (recorded in earlier writings) from later prophetic utterances is seen in the way in which, after quoting in viii. 8 Jeremiah's promise of a new covenant, he goes on in the next chapter to recount in detail the construction and service of the tabernacle and the inauguration of the first covenant. Still again, after citing Haggai ii. 6, he links up this with the circumstances at Sinai when the earth shook at the voice of the Lord, again reverting in thought to the writings of the Pentateuch.

The interpretative treatment given the histories from these " hints " in the Psalms (and to a less degree in the Prophets) is remarkable, for the deductions so made involve a peculiar time-sense. The appeal, " To-day, if ye will hear his voice " (words spoken in David's day), necessarily implies that all previous appeals, if not entire failures, had had at least only a partial response, and that even the entrance into the land through Joshua only partially fulfilled the promise of entering into God's rest. The " to-day " of the Psalmist had added something to the meaning of the previous history. The same holds good of the words " for ever " in Ps. cx. 4, which supply the clue that led to the particular interpretation of the history in Genesis. For it is reasonable to assume that it was these words " a priest for ever ", taken in conjunction with the immediate mention of Melchizedek, that led the writer to arrive at the interpretative reasoning that he adopts in expounding the passage in Genesis. Similarly, the announcement in Jeremiah of a " new " covenant leads him to infer the abrogation of the old. The other quotations used likewise imply, in one way or another, the passing of an older dispensation and the advent of the messianic age, with all that this connotes.

The Epistle to the Hebrews avoids abstractions: it deals with persons. It introduces, directly, Moses, Aaron, Joshua, Melchizedek, Abraham, Esau, and the great array of names catalogued among " the heroes of faith " in chapter xi. But there are others present also in the writer's mind, and which only reveal themselves when the author's method of quoting Scripture is understood. Westcott, in his commentary on the Hebrews, adverts to the personal background of some of the quotations. For example, he notes how the two quotations

found in Heb. i. 5 refer respectively to David as the subduer of God's enemies and to Solomon as the builder of God's house. This economy of reference illustrates the method of the writer. It appears again in the quotation from Ps. viii (cf. Heb. ii. 5–8), a verse that leads him back to Adam and to the whole context of events recorded in the first three chapters of Genesis, another instance of reaching Genesis through the Psalms. Three Old Testament quotations in Heb. ii. 12–13 in like manner bring before us King David in other aspects of his life, and also the prophet Isaiah with his sign-children.

Historical situations are proverbially difficult to present in adequate condensed summary: here, by a significant reference, the reader is made to feel the contemporary force of a continuous and sometimes complex historical development with which he is already familiar in detail, or to the records of which he has easy access. The method serves several ends: it avoids protracted accounts of events with which the reader is already conversant; it subserves the writer's predilection for using historical figures and historical situations for enforcing spiritual and religious truth; and it becomes a tacit witness to the authority and permanent value of the Old Testament as a prolegomenon to the New. Messianic figures, from Adam onward, appear in swift succession, and the impression is created of a complex and ever-increasing development taking place toward the realization of a divine ideal. These messianic figures, it is true, each fall short of the ideal, but it is as representing some portion of it that they have their prime value in Scripture. There are indeed contrasts between them and Christ, but these contrasts are not opposed as " bad " to " good ", but as imperfect to perfect. This is implicit in the two opening verses of the epistle: the one God speaks throughout. These typical persons exhibit in varying degrees different strands in the finished pattern, constituent elements in the final synthesis. Christ is the sum of them all: but these, in spite of their own inadequacy, have value because of their relation to Him. This casts a strong light upon the importance of the Old Testament for a full Christian theology.

In all this we see how the author, avoiding the bare recital of facts, alludes to them in a manner that gives them moral force and spiritual meaning. The books of the Old Testament are seen to be interpenetrated by a common purpose, and to be linked with those of the New in a final harmony of prophetic

fulfilment. This dominating fact should condition our attitude to the writings of the Old Testament. Though the forms and modes of thought that properly belonged to the dispensations in which they are found may have passed away (as the epistle itself teaches), it is because they have served their purpose; but they still have value for us as records of God's dealings with men throughout the flow of the ages, and to think that we can now dispense with them is to deprive ourselves of the means of a fuller understanding of the broad scope of God's overruling providence in human history. The epistle moves freely throughout the Old Testament, without embarrassment or apology, as the natural heritage of Christian faith. It reads distinctively Christian blessings into the promises and messianic types of the ancient Scriptures, and, while it does not ignore the contrasts, sees things rather in comparisons, even if to the disadvantage of the earlier age. It traces a texture of leading ideas throughout the books of the Old Covenant in a way that presupposes an essential unity and leads up to their full consummation in the New.

Modern views of the Old Testament writings often take lower ground. The purely secular one, that the Old Testament is merely " Jewish history ", will, of course, be rejected outright by all true Christians, and even by thoughtful men, since it ignores the self-evident religious character of the book. Moreover, in the Old Testament histories we do not find that idealistic presentation of events to which nationalistic pride is naturally disposed, but rather an objective record of failure and decline set over against a divine choice and purpose. If we are to take the record as it stands, Israel's hope lay, not in themselves, but in God.

Other interpreters, again, see in the Old Testament man's imperfect search after God, and that only—phases of religious knowledge that became outmoded in the light of fuller experience. This certainly fastens on much in the Old Testament (valid for the time then present) that has passed away or been superseded in the New. The Lord's own words, " It was written of old time . . . but I say unto you " point to some such contrast and difference of outlook between the Old and the New. But it is altogether a different matter to say that, because of this, we may now regard the Old Testament as having no authority for faith or conduct, and that the New is our sole guide. The elements in the Old Testament which are a

stumbling-block to some—the imprecatory Psalms, for instance—belonged to a period when God's law took account of the hardness of men's hearts and framed its government accordingly. This principle was laid down by the Saviour when He spoke of the Mosaic law of divorce as being a modification of the original ideal law, and said, " It was allowed because of the hardness of your hearts: it was not so in the beginning." This by no means invalidates the absoluteness of the original ideal, but shows that divine revelation takes the form of progressive teaching. All such other elements must be interpreted within a wider frame of reference that treats the Old Testament as a progressive revelation up to the New: they are not to be construed apart from that wider frame of reference, but made subordinate to it. The links with the New are of greater importance than the dispensational differences. In reading the Old Testament we must keep a due sense of proportion and balance, perceiving that, though there are rudimentary elements in it, acceptance of the Old Testament is integral to a proper understanding of the New.

*Kirkwall, Orkney.* ROBERT RENDALL.