



A word on the Word

The importance of the Old Testament in understanding the Christian gospel

A monthly series on the Bible by Carrie Boren, Missioner for Evangelism

Occasionally, someone will say to me, “I don’t read the Old Testament because it’s irrelevant to the New Testament gospel. The God of the Old Testament seems so different from the God of the New Testament.”

Questioning the Old Testament’s relevance to the gospel is not new. For centuries, theologians and everyday Christians have debated its significance for the Christian faith. However, from the beginning, Jesus’ followers viewed Old Testament scripture as vital for understanding the gospel. In fact, in the New Testament, the word “scripture” refers to Old Testament writings since the New Testament had not yet been completed and codified (*cf.*, 2 Tim. 3:14-17; 2 Pet. 1:19-21). The Apostolic Fathers believed the two testaments formed one Bible and accepted both as scripture even before the councils formally defined the canon.

The first major opponent to the Old Testament was Marcion, who lived in the mid second century. Similar to many Gnostics, he believed in the discontinuity “between flesh and spirit, law and gospel, the God of Israel and the Father of Jesus, the Old Testament and the New Testament,” (*Baker*, p. 35). According to Marcion, the God of the Old Testament was an earthy, violent, demiurge compared to the divine spark revealed in Christ, who was the instrument for understanding the true God. The God of creation, law, and justice was not the God of mercy and salvation. Consequently, Marcion’s “bible” contained only Luke’s Gospel — minus, what he termed, the “judaizing corruptions” — and 10 Pauline Epistles (*Eerdmans*, p. 855).

Several of the early churches’ greatest theologians spent a lot of energy countering this heretic’s claims: Justin Martyr (c. 100-165), Irenaeus (c. 130-200), Tertullian (c. 160-225), Origen (c. 185-254), and Clement of Alexandria (c. 150-215). Their challenges to Marcion’s heresy solidified the importance of the Old Testament to the Christian faith.

The heart of the Christian gospel, the “Good News,” is that in Jesus Christ, God came to earth and walked among us. He suffered and died a brutal death for us on the cross. He rose again, defeated death, and gained for us eternal life and reunion with God. Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection changed the face of history for eternity. Yet this is not the entire story. Old Testament history prepared the way for His arrival. Without it, the full meaning and significance of Jesus’ life is lost. Nothing in Christianity is unique except the person of Jesus. The Jewish Old Testament contains all the gospel’s underpinnings and purpose.

St. Augustine wrote, “The Old Testament and the New Testament constitute a divine library, one sublime

unity, origins in past to issues in future, processes between, connecting two eternities.” St. Paul, himself, noted, “And the Scripture (meaning Law, Prophets, and Writings), foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, declared the gospel beforehand to Abraham” (Gal. 3:8).

The following are some Old Testament themes that are fundamental for understanding the Christian gospel.

Creation and the Fall

Gen. 1-3 in the Old Testament is essential for understanding the person of God and the world’s need for a Saviour. Its story describes a perfect world created by a good God who desires all things to be in perfect harmony with Him. However, man uses his God-given free will to reject God’s sovereignty and go his own way. As a result, sin enters the world and creates a deep chasm between God and men. They now need a Saviour to repair that breach. From the beginning, God has prepared for this eventuality. In Gen. 3:15, God predicts that a future offspring of a woman will eventually crush the serpent’s head — a promise Christ fulfills in his victory over Satan. If we don’t know this story, we will not understand our real need for a Saviour.

God’s covenantal plan for salvation

After the Fall, one compelling question remained: How could men return to the Garden of Eden and live in perfect harmony with God? The Old Testament shows that God chose a people from whom the Messiah would save the world. “The Lord said to Abram, ‘Leave your country, your people and your father’s household and go to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you. I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you and whoever curses you I will curse; and all the peoples on earth will be blessed through you’” (Gen. 12:1-3). St. Paul believed this promise of grace was the gospel.

Throughout Jewish history, they waited for the Messiah who would reconcile them to God and usher in His kingdom on earth. Jesus Christ fulfilled this covenant. He is the vessel of God’s grace to His people.

Old Testament prophecies

Fulfilled prophecy demonstrates God’s faithfulness and proves that Jesus was nothing short of God on earth. Scholars note that Christ’s life, death, and resurrection fulfilled over 322 prophecies found in the Old Testament. Repeatedly, the Gospel writers pen these words, “This was done in order to fulfill ...” The author of Hebrews reflects: “In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. The son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being,

sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven” (Heb. 1:1-3).

Old Testament law

The law reveals God’s standards for His people. Unfortunately, humans inevitably fall short and are in need of God’s grace. Christ not only kept the law and called everyone to a higher standard than the law, but he also paid the complete penalty for the broken law. Christ suffered that we might be spared (*cf.*, Heb. 9:13-15, 10:1-22; 1 Pet. 1:18-20). The Law God gave on Mt. Sinai points to the need for Mount Calvary.

Jesus’ Jewishness

Jesus is a man of the Old Testament. We cannot fully understand His character and practices on earth without knowing the Old Testament. From its pages, we can better understand the significance behind Jesus’ daring to heal people on the Sabbath, His boldness in overturning the Temple tables, the radical nature of his interactions with foreigners and “sinful” men, His compassionate and fair treatment of women, His authoritative teaching, His self reference as the Son of Man who would usher in the Kingdom of God, His ability to be perfect, His willingness to receive worship, and His unprecedented practice of forgiving people’s sins.

Jesus Christ fully satisfies through His life and death what was once the longing and hope of the Jewish people. He is the new exodus (Isa. 52:11-12), the new David (Isa. 9:7), the new covenant (Jer. 31:31-34), the new temple (Ezra 40:48), and the new creation (Isa. 65:17-19). He fulfills Old Testament promises and God’s plan throughout history. The Good News of Jesus Christ spans the whole of the Bible from the Old to the New.

Karl Barth wrote, “The Old Testament, though a completely Jewish book, none the less refers to Christ ... The Old Testament looks forward, the New Testament speaks of the future while looking back, and both look to Christ.”



FOR VALENTINE’S DAY,
READ GOD’S LOVE
LETTER TO YOU!

As we read letters from friends or loved ones, we get to know them more intimately and experience their presence with us. Just so, as we read the Bible, we get to know God. Take some time to read His love letter to you. It will draw you closer to Him and warm your soul.