

WHY DOES A CHRISTIAN NEED THE OLD TESTAMENT?

by Mark Gilroy

FOCUS

I remember the first Bible I received. It was the New Testament and Psalms, pocket-sized, in red, “genuine imitation” leather. It was easy to carry back and forth to church for gold stars. In fact, it was just right—except for the one time when as a seven-year-old, I stumbled onto Psalm 137, where David hated his enemies so much he wanted to smash their babies’ brains against the stones. I wondered why that was in the Bible. Other than that, I didn’t doubt that my Christian scriptures, the New Testament and Psalms, were . . . well . . . usually pretty Christian.

Then I was promoted into the fourth grade. I received another Bible. It was something to behold. The front and back covers were covered with illustrated Bible scenes. Better yet, every hundred pages or so inside, there would be a beautiful picture of a great moment from the Bible. I never tired of the picture that showed a young shepherd boy named David slinging a rock toward the towering giant Goliath. And I had no trouble understanding the moral of the story. If we have faith in God, we can defeat giants in our lives too!

Great as the pictures and most of the stories were, this Bible was harder to understand in some places. Those few times I would read within the first two-thirds of the book, I was bored, or confused, or lost, or a little repulsed, or all of the above.

Which brings us to this session. Why do Christians need the Old Testament at all? Are these 39 books really Christian? Are they Christian enough to have authority over the heart and life of followers of Jesus Christ?

Now, I know that not many of your class members are making this question a burning issue, *explicitly*. We don’t cause a stir because we have been taught that there are 66 books that make up our Christian canon (the written standard of truth that all other truth must be measured against), 27 in the New Testament, and 39 in the Old. No one’s ripping two-thirds of their Bible out and leaving it at home, but . . .

Implicitly, underneath the surface, the authority of the Old Testament *is* an issue for many. Even though they don’t put it into words, they wonder about the place of the Old Testament in their lives.

Some take care of the tension by *ignoring* it completely—with the exception of the Psalms and Proverbs, of course. When was the last time *you* read Leviticus and Numbers?

Some superficially handle the tension by putting a *nice interpretation* on difficult passages. You figure out what to do with Genesis 12:10-20! I’m sure Abraham didn’t *really* give Sarah, his wife, to the Egyptian Pharaoh to sleep with, aren’t you?

Some handle the tension by arbitrarily *deciding* what we carry into the New Testament era, and what we leave behind. Hey, don’t laugh. When was the last time your church sacrificed a ram, goat, and heifer? I know, the ceremonial law has been superseded by Jesus Christ. So, why do we put such emphasis on other ceremonial laws like tithing?

This lesson can go one of two ways. It can be a typical (ho-hum) study of some typical (yawn) passages, or you can challenge your students to carefully—and quite likely uncomfortably—ask some important questions regarding a widely recognized, yet often ignored and just as often misunderstood, source of their faith, the Old Testament.

Selected references from a variety of Old Testament sources will be explored throughout the lesson.

COMMENTARY

Use the Commentary as background information and discussion material as you prepare and facilitate this lesson.

There Really Are Some Strange Things in the Old Testament*

That's right, at times the Old Testament is just plain hard to understand and even harder to explain. Consider:

1. The Old Testament was not written as a Christian document. It is the "Bible" of another faith and people, Judaism and the people of Israel. There are undoubtedly similarities with Judaism and Christianity—that's why we speak of the Judeo-Christian heritage. Yet, there are even more differences. The Old Testament is full of rituals, customs, and ceremonies that are still practiced to some degree and are extremely meaningful to people of the Jewish faith. However, these practices are, with just a few exceptions, strange and foreign to Christians.

For example, much of the Old Testament is made up of instructions regarding sacrifices, ritual purity, the support of clergy, feasts and other sacred days, and other factors of Jewish worship. These instructions were binding upon the people of Israel, but have no real authority today except in certain small Christian sects. We have taken the lead of Paul, who said, "Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ" (Colossians 2:16-17).

2. There are morally questionable examples in the Old Testament. Abraham made his beautiful wife claim to be his sister and gave her to the Pharaoh of Egypt to keep himself from being harmed (Genesis 12:10-20). This is the same man that was later inducted into the "Hall of Faith" in Hebrews 11.

In Psalm 137, the songwriter feels such bitterness against his enemies from Babylon that he wishes someone would take their babies and bash their brains against the rocks.

The Old Testament even claims that God *commands* such barbarous behavior. In 1 Samuel 15:3, God commands Saul, "Now go, attack the Amalekites and totally destroy everything that belongs to them. Do not spare them; put to death men and women, children and infants, cattle and sheep, camels and donkeys." When Saul doesn't "totally" follow through, Samuel, a man of exemplary faith, takes this action on behalf of God: "And Samuel put Agag to death before the LORD at Gilgal" (v. 33b).

In Numbers 15:32-36, we read: "While the Israelites were in the desert, a man was found gathering wood on the Sabbath day. Those who found him gathering wood brought him to Moses and Aaron . . . Then the LORD said

to Moses, 'The man must die. The whole assembly must stone him outside the camp.' So the assembly took him outside the camp and stoned him to death, as the LORD commanded Moses."

3. The Old Testament is addressed to a different culture, with a different government and different laws. That is already obvious from some of the examples listed above. The difficulty is this: we claim that the Old Testament is authoritative, but we make no attempt to incorporate all of its "God-given laws," with their clearly stated conditions and penalties, into our culture today.

For example, if a husband today suspects that his wife is unfaithful, we don't practice the instructions of Numbers 5:11-31. If we did, the husband would bring his wife before a priest. The woman would then be given water laced with poison. If she was innocent, as she claimed, the poison would not harm her. If she had slept with another man, the poison would cause great pain and possibly death.

We make no attempts to set up cities of refuge as prescribed in Deuteronomy 19:1-13 because we don't need them. In Old Testament times, the cities of refuge were the only place a man could be assured that he would receive a fair trial. Today, in much of the world, a fair trial and due process of law are the reasonable expectations.

Undoubtedly our society has been influenced by the ideals behind the Old Testament laws. Nevertheless, to take over most of the laws of the Old Testament and apply them directly to our modern society would be nothing less than a ridiculous effort.

By what standard then are these laws to be interpreted, adapted, changed, ignored, or applied?

4. Further, the New Testament seems to contradict the Old Testament. Consider the famous passage from the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5:21-48, where Jesus repeats the phrase, "You have heard that it was said," quoting Old Testament and rabbinic teachings each time, only to correct each teaching with the words, "But I tell you." These were the words of Jesus! They should carry some weight.

In Acts 10:9-23, we read that while in Joppa, Peter has a vision of a sheet lowered from heaven, containing animals that the Old Testament expressly forbids to be eaten. When Peter hears the Lord command him, "Get up, Peter. Kill and eat," he exclaims, "Surely not, Lord! . . . I have never eaten anything impure or unclean." The voice rebukes him: "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean." Isn't the point of the passage that the Old Testament and its teachings are being replaced by something new and radically different?

There really are some difficult questions about the Old Testament for the Christian. And yet we boldly proclaim the Old Testament is an authoritative guide for our lives!

Some “Classical Solutions”

The struggle with what to do with the Old Testament goes back to the earliest days of church history. There are a number of options that have been explored.

1. Throw it out! The most famous person to propose the solution of throwing the Old Testament out was Marcion, who lived in the second century. This man is credited with one of the first heresies of the Christian church, divorcing it from the Old Testament. The salvation offered by Jesus Christ simply could not be understood in terms of Judaism and the Old Testament, he believed. The vindictive God of the Law could not be equated with the gracious God revealed by Jesus Christ.

Marcion's views were rejected outright by the Church. Today his views have been rejected by all but the most liberal of Protestant traditions. Still, there have been subtle Marcionite tendencies throughout the history of the Church. Perhaps even the fact that so many Bible publishers print just the New Testament, with Psalms and Proverbs at times, indicates such a tendency. And perhaps the fact that so few Christians actually spend time in the Old Testament suggests that Marcion may not have been so different from many Christians today!

2. Reinterpret it! In sharp contrast to Marcion, many of the Early Church fathers employed the creative methods of allegory and typology to overcome any “apparent” contradictions between the Old and New Testaments.

With allegory, it was assumed that the Old Testament was written with several intended levels of meaning: the literal, the moral, and the mystical. Thus, for example, “Jerusalem” represented:

- the earthly city located in the Middle East (literal),
- the soul of the faithful Christian (moral), and
- the church of Jesus Christ (mystical).

The most important meaning was obviously the mystical or spiritual meaning, so theologians didn't quibble over passages that created difficulties when interpreted strictly in the literal sense. In fact, they interpreted everything allegorically. For example, in the story of the flood, the ark is the Church, Noah is Christ, the dove is the Holy Spirit, and the olive branch the divine mercy. When Moses stretched out his arms to support the Israelites in battle, as described in Exodus 17:8-16, he was symbolically making the sign of the Cross. The three spies who were sent to Jericho are the three persons of the Trinity. Rahab's scarlet cord pointed to the redemption found in the scarlet blood of Jesus Christ (Joshua 2).

Most serious Bible students do not use such allegorizing today for a reliable or exclusive method of fully examining and understanding the Old Testament. There are, however, some subtle ways that such reinterpreting of the Old Testament still is carried over.

The most common is the “Christological approach” to

An Example

Here's an example of how one can unlock the Old Testament keeping in mind the concepts discussed in the Commentary:

Leviticus 25 can hardly be called one of the high points of the Old Testament. The regulations described there are obviously so little related to the modern situation that the Bible student might be pardoned if he told himself that the passage contains no relevant message whatever. It stipulates, among other things, that if a man should be forced because of debt to sell a part of his inherited property, his next of kin was obligated to redeem the land in question, thus keeping it in the family (v. 25). But land was not in any event to be sold in perpetuity (v. 23) but must revert to its original owner at the year of Jubilee, the price being adjusted according to the length of time between the date of sale and the next such year (vs. 13-17, 27-28).

Now the intent of this law is clear, and it is a worthy one: to prevent the amassing of large estates in the hands of a few, while poor peasants were crowded from their land. But the law is not one that serves us directly. How could it ever be applied or enforced in a complex society such as ours? So let us say it: The law, as law, is ancient, irrelevant, and without authority.

But what of the theology behind the law? That the entire chapter is built upon a very definite theological concern is obvious to all who read it carefully. It seeks to tell us that the land is God's and that we live on this earth as aliens and sojourners, holding all that we have on loan from Him (v. 23). In light of this, God expects that we will conduct our business affairs in the fear of Him (vs. 17, 36, 43), dealing graciously with the less fortunate brother and remembering that we have all been recipients of grace (vs. 38, 42).

Now the law speaks with an eternal relevance to the Christian, whose Christ is the righteousness that has fulfilled the law. The law we cannot obey; but we are called in all our dealings to obey the theology of the law.

—John Bright, *The Authority of the Old Testament*

the Old Testament. This approach rejects a study of the Old Testament which is based primarily on its historical meaning because this leaves us with the book of an ancient religion that has little relevance today, much as was described in earlier sections. People who espouse this approach claim that the Bible, including the Old Testament, must be interpreted in the light of its true *intention*, its true theme. And that true theme is Christ. The Old

Testament, in its every detail, must be studied to find how it witnesses to Christ. Literal meaning is replaced with Christological meaning: the “light” of Genesis 1 is reinterpreted as a reference to the “glory” of Jesus, the sign of Cain (Genesis 4:15) is reinterpreted to mean the sign of the Cross, the man/angel with whom Jacob wrestled at midnight is Jesus Christ himself.

There may be some validity in making these kinds of connections between the Old and the New Testaments, but there is a problem. What was being revealed about God when the Old Testament was written doesn't really count. The Old Testament becomes merely an echo of the New. And as with the allegorical method, it becomes subject to the endless, subjective interpretations of the scholar, preacher, or reader.

3. Pick the best; leave the rest. A third solution is often associated with “liberal” Protestant scholars. You don't throw out the entire Old Testament. You simply throw out those parts that don't measure up to the ethical and moral standards of the New Testament.

Why? The writing of the Bible was conditioned by history. It was written by men, who might have been inspired by God to some degree or another, but who were still very fallible. Divine inspiration could not guard the writers from moral and religious errors they might hold. This view argues that the religion of the Old Testament evolved and developed. Thus, the primitive, earliest moral and religious beliefs should be ignored. The higher religious and moral expressions found in the Old Testament are valid, and can be considered with benefit by the Christian.

Though religious and moral expression did change and develop throughout the Old Testament, this approach ignores the intent of the Old Testament. It robs it (and us) of its historical foundations. And it puts the reader again in a position of evaluation and judgment over the Old Testament rather than placing the Old Testament in a position of evaluation and judgment over its readers!

For Your Consideration

Having spent considerable time looking at the problems in understanding the Old Testament, are we now in a position to give up and say this part of our Bible really is of little practical value to the Christian? Not yet.

Here are some ideas on how we can make sense of the Old Testament, keeping both its integrity and ours.

1. What makes the Old Testament authoritative for the Christian is its theological intent, what it says about God. The Old Testament does not have the fulfillment of the New Testament, but it does introduce the very theological themes that the New Testament affirms. The New Testament takes up the great central themes of the Old Testament's theology—God's gracious election of His people, His covenant with them and kingly rule over them, His purposes for them and promises to them. Often

the New Testament does not introduce a new truth, but rather gives deeper significance to an Old Testament truth in light of what Christ has done.

2. The Old Testament is a historical work. God has encountered people in a very real and tangible way. The Old Testament provides a history of God's dealings with His people. While the history of Israel may not be exemplary for the Christian, it is vital that we see how God has revealed himself to His people in the past so that we have some context for His work in history today.

3. The text must be studied with its original meaning in mind. Each Old Testament writer had a specific word from God that applied to the people of his day. Behind the passage was the belief and revelation that God was at work among His people establishing His kingdom. The question that must be pursued is this: what was the author trying to say about God and His work in the context of a particular historical circumstance. Only *after* that takes place can we think in terms of New Testament application.

John Bright summarizes our discussion with these words:

No part of the [Old Testament] is without authority, for all parts reflect in one way some facet of that structure of faith which is supremely normative for Christian faith and practice.

Perhaps that statement requires clarification, for it may seem to the reader too strong. It certainly does not intend to say that there are no degrees of value in the Bible. There are. Each of us admits as much by the fact that we read certain part of the Bible over and over again till the pages are worn, while reading other parts seldom or never. Nor does it mean to say that all parts of the Bible are of equal theological importance. It would surely be no irreverence to say that the Ten Commandments are of greater theological importance than the genealogical lists of 1 Chronicles 1—9, Isaiah than Esther or the Song of Solomon. But that merely says that some parts of the Bible stand less close to its central theological themes than do others . . . There are indeed degrees of theological importance and value in the Bible. But all of it is valid for us, for each of its texts in some way reflects or expresses some aspect of its structure of theology and thus shares in the authority of that theology. There are no non-theological texts in the Bible.

(The following three lessons in this unit will give you and your students specific keys to further help you unlock the Old Testament. This lesson will serve primarily to show that there is a place for the Old Testament in the Christian's life, one that makes sense and one that is authoritative.)

*The classic work on the subject of how Christians are to relate to the Old Testament is *The Authority of the Old Testament*, by John Bright (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1967). Much of what is presented here is derived from that work.

N-SESSION COMMUNITY BUILDING OPTIONS

Select one or more of these activities to begin building bridges between students as you introduce today's subject.

1. "Do You Know the Old Testament?" Quick Quiz

Have fun with this activity, which introduces the topic of the place of the Old Testament in the Christian's life.

Give your students a quick quiz. This quiz is printed on *Duplication/Transparency Master No. 1A*, and again below, with the answers. Be sure to keep the grading process light and humorous. You can administer the quiz verbally or by distributing written "tests." You will want to end the activity with these discussion questions:

- **How important is it for a Christian to know the Old Testament?**
- **Is the Old Testament really relevant to living the Christian life?**

"DO YOU KNOW THE OLD TESTAMENT?"

1. How many books in the Old Testament? (39)
2. Who is the traditional author/collector of the Psalms? (David)
3. Whom did God call from the land of Ur of the Chaldeans to become the father of His people and inhabit a special land? (Abram or Abraham)
4. Who led the people of Israel out of Egypt? (Moses)
5. Who was the prostitute from Jericho that aided the Israelite spies? (Rahab)
6. How many tribes of Israel were there? (12)
7. What country destroyed the Northern Kingdom of Israel? (Assyria)
8. What country took the Southern Kingdom of Judah into captivity? (Babylon)
9. Which of the following three men was a king of Israel: Hosea, Joab, Hezekiah? (Hezekiah)
10. T/F Queen Esther called on the name of God more than any other woman in the Old Testament. (F—God is not even mentioned in the Book of Esther)

BONUS: Give yourself an extra point if you have read the entire Old Testament.

After you help your class members add up their scores, let them know where they stand:

10-11 correct—ex-Bible quizzers who are dying to show off their trophy collections

8-9—were model teenagers who not only attended Sunday School, but paid attention

5-7—remember some Bible stories from childhood, and do well on true-false and multiple-choice questions

0-4—are definitely encouraged to come to class the next several weeks as the importance of the Old Testament is discussed

2. "Maybe You Can Answer Some Questions I Have About the Old Testament" Case Study

Introduce your class to Jerry. Jerry is a new Christian who recently accepted Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior at a home Bible study. Now he has questions that he would like your opinion on.

Keeping your discussion very brief, encourage your class members to respond to Jerry. If related issues are raised by other members of your class, feel free to deal with them as well.

1. The Old Testament seems so different from the New Testament—morally, culturally, even in the way God is presented. Why do we as Christians embrace the Old Testament?
2. Is the Old Testament as important as the New Testament?
3. How have you worked through questions about the Old Testament that you have?

3. Gripe Session

The purpose of this activity is to help your students verbalize questions/difficulties/problems they have encountered with the Old Testament. In addition to creating interest, the activity should help you gain understanding as to where your students are in response to this issue.

One of the favorite, though sometimes over-practiced, activities of young adults is to sit around with friends and gripe. Announce to your class that that is how you will begin this session. The topic? "When I read the Old Testament, I am uncomfortable with and bothered by . . ."

Let this be the starting point for 10 minutes of class discussion. Facilitate discussion between class members with questions like, Has anyone else felt like John? Do you agree with the point Debbie just made?

If your class doesn't take off with the discussion, here is a question you might throw out: **How can you not be disturbed by the Old Testament when it is so different than the New Testament?**

4. Choose Sides

Two very different views of the value of the Old Testament are printed on *Duplication/Transparency Master No. 1B*. Have your students read each view and decide with which view they most honestly agree.

P RESENTATION OPTIONS

Select one or more of the following activities to present today's topic.

1. Class Reports

Assign three different students early in the week to present the three major sections of the Commentary: "There Really Are Some Strange Things in the Old Testament," "Some 'Classical Solutions,'" and "For Your Consideration." Each should present a five-minute report on his or her assigned material.

After each section, have the presenter ask the class for comments concerning his or her report.

Conclude this activity by sharing the Leviticus 25 example from the Commentary as a way of unlocking the Old Testament.

2. Minilecture/Discussion

Present the material from the Commentary in an outline format. Give students:

- An overview of the problems in understanding the Old Testament.
- Some of the ways people have tried to understand the Old Testament.
- Some considerations for a helpful understanding of the Old Testament.
- The example from Leviticus 25 to conclude this section.

Allow time for discussion after each point.

3. "What Are the Options?" Discussion

Briefly introduce the three "classical" solutions to the "problem" of the Old Testament, which are listed in the Commentary. Ask your students to point out the strengths and weaknesses of each solution.

4. "Marcion vs. the Church" Debate

Before class, select four students from your class to be involved in a short debate. Two of the students will argue from Marcion's point of view, namely that the Old Testament should be eliminated from the Christian's Bible completely. (One of the two can be Marcion himself, while the other can be his "assistant.") The other two students will argue from the traditional view of the Church that the Old Testament cannot be divorced from the New Testament and is vital for all Christians.

Give both teams a copy of the Commentary section as they prepare, and encourage them to add their own ideas and emotions to the debate.

Prepare signs for each of the debate teams, costumes for the Marcionites if you wish, and an atmosphere that will encourage your "audience" to vocally side with one team or the other.

SUMMARY OPTIONS

Select one or more of these activities to summarize and give opportunity for students to apply the truth learned through this lesson.

1. Case Study Revisited

Return to the earlier case study, found in In-Session Community Building Option 2. If you already used the activity, repeat Jerry's questions, and ask the class what else they might say to him, after being a part of this class session.

If you didn't use the activity, simply follow the directions listed in the original activity.

2. Write an Article of Faith

Nearly all denominations have articles of faith that express the essence or core of what they believe. Here is an example of an article of faith regarding the Bible:

We believe in the plenary inspiration of the holy Scriptures, by which we understand the 66 books of the Old and New Testaments, given by divine inspiration, inerrantly revealing the will of God concerning us in all things necessary to our salvation, so that whatever is not contained therein is not to be enjoined as an article of faith (2001-2004 Nazarene *Manual*).

Tell your class that there is a group in your denomination that wants to remove the Old Testament from the

Bible. Divide your class into small groups, distribute paper and pens, and ask each group to come up with an article of faith regarding the Old Testament for their church. They must draft an article that succinctly states and defines what the church believes about the Old Testament in a way that will be understood and convincing.

3. "Is This Really Going to Change Your Life?" Challenge

Ask each of your class members to answer this simple question: **How do I want my attitude and behavior toward the Old Testament to change after this session?**

If your class is large, make this a small-group sharing activity.

Encourage openness, even if you are not totally comfortable and confident about some of the responses you might hear. Some will see no need for change. Some will simply not desire to change. Others may want to come to know the Old Testament better and make it a more vital part of their lives. It will be good for class members to hear what others are thinking. This will also be an excellent time for you to evaluate what took place during the lesson as you prepare the following lessons in the unit.

Use **INTERSECT: College Chat Discussion Starters** to continue discussion on this lesson in a weekday Bible study session, as a take-home resource for further thought after today's lesson, or to supplement your in-session teaching of this lesson.

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