

Is the Old Testament for Christians? **By Graeme Goldsworthy**

Part One

It is indisputable that even evangelical Christians demonstrate a neglect of and ignorance towards the first three quarters of the Bible. Ironically, the evangelical view of Scripture itself can make the problem worse. For the "modernist" is happy to dismiss as crude and primitive those parts of the Old Testament which he finds morally offensive. The "conservative," on the other hand, has to find some way of reconciling his view of the Old Testament as the Word of God with such things as...Israel's slaughter of the Canaanites, the cursing of enemies in some Psalms, or the wide prescription of capital punishment in the law of Moses. Even if parts of the Old Testament do not appear morally reprehensible to the "conservative" Christian, other parts appear to be completely irrelevant.

For some, the problem with the Old Testament is simply that on the whole they find it dry and uninteresting; it is wordy, cumbersome, and confusing. Whatever their view of Scripture, the sheer weight and complexity of this collection of ancient books (more than three times the bulk of the New Testament) leads to boredom, apathy, and neglect rather than deliberately thought-out rejection.

There is a simple way to avoid these difficulties. Our consciences are less likely to prick us for the neglect of the Old Testament if we are giving ourselves to the study of the New! After a while the Old Testament drops right out of sight and that does not cause us any pain at all.

Happily there are people who still read the Old Testament. Their conviction that the Old Testament is part of God's written revelation is no doubt partly responsible for this. Also, if it is interpreted correctly, the Old Testament yields much to interest both young and old. Children's teachers and designers of Sunday school curricula are among the most consistent users of the narratives of ancient Israel, for they contain a wealth of excitement and human interest to capture the imagination of children of all ages. Tell a good story about one of Israel's battles and you can have the kids on the edge of their seats! Yet pitfalls abound for the teacher who wants to draw out a Christian message from the Old Testament, though they may not be apparent until the unity of the Bible is understood.

A Wrong Turn

Failure to recognize the unity of Scripture led some of the early expositors to follow false trails. The emergence of the allegorical method of interpretation in the early church provides a good example. Because much of the Old Testament was seen as unhelpful or sub-Christian, the only way to save it for Christian use was to distinguish a hidden "spiritual" sense, concealed behind the natural meaning.

Allegory seemed to be a legitimate method of interpretation because it was controlled by the content of the New Testament or, later on, by church dogma. What was lacking, however, was the kind of control the New Testament itself applied when it used the Old Testament. Instead, the relationship between the natural meaning of the Old Testament and the teachings of the New was left to the ingenuity

of the expositor. One serious effect of the allegorical method was that it tended to hinder people from taking the historical or natural sense of the Old Testament seriously.

Nor did this problem exist only for the Old Testament. In the Middle Ages, the logic was taken a step further. Not only was the "unhelpful" natural sense of the Old Testament given its spiritual sense from the natural sense of the New Testament. Even the natural sense of the New Testament was seen to require its own spiritual interpretation, which was found in the tradition of the church. Thus, authority now lay, not in the natural meaning of the canon of Scripture, but in the teachings of the church as it interpreted the spiritual meaning according to its own dogma.

The Reformation Return

It was the Protestant Reformers who helped the Christian church see again the importance of the historical and natural meaning of Scripture, so that the Old Testament could be regarded as having value in itself. When the Reformers recovered the authority of the Bible, they not only reaffirmed a biblical doctrine of the church and salvation, but also a biblical doctrine of Scripture. Protestant interpretation was based upon the concept of the *perspicuous* (clear and self-interpreting) nature of the Bible. By removing an authority for interpretation from outside the Bible—the infallible church—the Reformers were free to accept and see the principles of interpretation that are contained within the Bible itself.

So the self-interpreting Scriptures became the sole rule of faith—*Sola Scriptura* was a rallying cry of the Reformation. The right of interpretation was restored to every believer, but this did not mean that the principles of interpretation found within the Bible could be overlooked and every Christian follow his own whim. The allegorical method became far less popular, because the historical meaning of the Old Testament was found to be significant on its own, within the unity of the Bible.

Perhaps we understand the Protestant position better in the light of other great principles which emerged at the Reformation. The Reformers maintained that salvation is a matter of *grace alone*, by *Christ alone*, through *faith alone*. "Grace alone" meant that salvation is God's work alone, unconditioned by anything that man is or does. "Christ alone" meant that the sinner is accepted by God on the basis of what Christ alone has done. "Faith alone" meant that the only way for the sinner to receive salvation is by faith whereby the righteousness of Christ is imputed (credited) to the believer.

What did this have to do with the Old Testament? It meant that the Reformers were establishing a method of biblical interpretation in which the natural historical sense of the Old Testament has significance for Christians because of its organic relationship to Christ. God's grace, seen in his dealings with Israel, is part of a living process which comes to its climax in his work of grace, the gospel, that is in the historical events of the Christ who is Jesus of Nazareth. Just as it is important to assert that this Old Testament salvation history must be interpreted by the Word, Jesus Christ, it is also important to recognize that the gospel is God acting in history—more specifically, through the history of Jesus.

Medieval theology had internalized and subjectivized the gospel to such an extent that the basis of acceptance with God, of justification, was no longer what God

did once for all in Christ, but what God was continuing to do in the life of the Christian. This *dehistoricizing* of what God had done once and for all in the gospel went hand in hand with the *allegorizing* of the history of the Old Testament. The Reformation recovered the historical Christ-event (the gospel) as the basis of our salvation and, in turn, the objective importance of Old Testament history.

Part Two

The most compelling reason for Christians to read and study the Old Testament lies in the New Testament. The New Testament witnesses to the fact that Jesus of Nazareth is the One in whom and through whom all the promises of God find their fulfillment. These promises are only to be understood from the Old Testament. The fulfillment of the promises can be understood only in the context of the promises themselves. The New Testament presupposes a knowledge of the Old Testament. Everything that is a concern to the New Testament writers is part of the one redemptive history to which the Old Testament witnesses. The New Testament writers cannot separate the person and work of Christ, nor the life of the Christian community, from this sacred history which has its beginnings in the Old Testament.

It is, of course, of great significance that the New Testament writers constantly quote or allude to the Old Testament. One estimate is that there are at least 1600 direct quotations of the Old Testament in the New, to which may be added several thousand more New Testament passages that clearly allude to or reflect Old Testament verses. Of course, not all these citations show direct continuity of thought with the Old Testament, and some even show a contrast between Old and New Testaments. But the overall effect is inescapable—the message of the New Testament has its foundation in the Old Testament.

Contrary to what is sometimes suggested, the New Testament writers were not in the habit of quoting texts without reference to their context. In fact, a quotation is sometimes intended to prompt the recall of an entire passage of Old Testament Scripture. For example, Paul's quotation in 1 Corinthians 10:7 of part of Exodus 32:6 refers to the festivities of the Israelites. The intention is to bring to mind the whole narrative of Israel's idolatry and the golden calf.

A person can become a Christian without much knowledge of the Old Testament. Conversion does, however, require a basic understanding of Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. The Christian cannot be committed to Christ without being committed to his teaching. It follows that Christ's attitude to the Old Testament will begin to convey itself to the Christian who is carefully studying the New Testament. The more we study the New Testament, the more apparent becomes the conviction shared by Jesus, the apostles, and the New Testament writers in general: namely, the Old Testament is Scripture and Scripture points to Christ. The manner in which the Old Testament testifies to Christ is a question that has to be resolved on the basis of the New Testament, since it is the New Testament which provides the Christian with an authoritative interpretation of the Old.

The effect of this is twofold. As Christians, we will always be looking at the Old Testament from the standpoint of the New Testament—from the framework of the gospel, which is the goal of the Old Testament. But since the New Testament continually presupposes the Old Testament as a unity, we, who are not acquainted

with the Old Testament in the way the first Christians were, will be driven back to study the Old Testament on its own terms. To understand the whole living process of redemptive history in the Old Testament, we must recognize two basic truths. The first is that this salvation history is a process. The second is that this process of redemptive history finds its goal, its focus, and its fulfillment in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

The Gospel Is at Stake

Failure to grasp this truth-largely because the proper study of the Old Testament has been neglected-has aided and abetted one of the most unfortunate reversals in evangelical theology. The core of the gospel, the historical facts of what God did in Jesus Christ, is often *downgraded* today in favor of a more mystical emphasis on the private spiritual experience of the individual. Whereas faith in the gospel is essentially acceptance of and commitment to the declaration that God acted in Christ some two thousand years ago on our behalf, saving faith is often portrayed nowadays more as trust in what God is doing in us now. Biblical ideas such as "the forgiveness of sins" or "salvation" are interpreted as primarily describing a Christian's personal, subjective experience.

But when we allow the whole Bible-Old and New Testaments-to speak to us, we find that those subjective aspects of the Christian life, which are undoubtedly important-the new birth, faith, and sanctification-are the *fruits* of the gospel. The gospel, while still relating to individual people at their point of need, is rooted and grounded in the history of redemption. It is the good news about Jesus, before it can become good news for sinful men and women. Indeed, it is only as the *objective* (redemptive-historical) facts are grasped that the *subjective* experience of the individual Christian can be understood.

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