

What is the Christian to make of the Old Testament? This question in various forms occurs from time to time in the life of the Church and those of individual believers. It is also a matter of interest to the enquiring non-believer, in particular the secularist who seeks a rod with which to beat the faithful.

The Christian who is handed a bible containing two distinct parts might well wonder why he is being asked to take notice of, and count as the received word of God, the older part – a text which clearly belongs to another faith. The secularist, familiar with instruction booklets and legal documents of various kinds, wonders why the Christian does not approach the bible as if it were such a text, taking each section to be of equal value rather than giving more weight to one part than another. The result for the Christian might easily be a sense of bewilderment, whilst for the secularist there is clear evidence for a charge of cherry-picking or even outright hypocrisy and dishonesty.

Unsurprisingly the question of what to do with the Old Testament has a long history. Discussions on the matter go back to the very beginning of the faith. For the very first Christians, being Jews, there was the question of how the coming of the messiah and his death and resurrection had changed their understanding of the (Old Testament) scriptures. What did it mean to say that scripture had been fulfilled and, in particular, what would happen to temple sacrifice now that Jesus' death, which they saw as the definitive sacrifice, had taken away the need for animal offerings? The answer for the early Church lay in the Old Testament itself which both foretold the coming of the messiah and contained the expectation that God would initiate a new and more intimate relationship, not only with the Jews, but with the Gentiles also. The prophet Isaiah had written about the inclusion of the Gentiles.

*The Lord says:*

*"It is too light a thing that you should be my servant  
to raise up the tribes of Jacob  
and to restore the preserved of Israel;*

*I will give you as a light to the nations,  
that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth."* (Isaiah 49: 6)

The prophet Jeremiah predicted the time when the people of God would no longer be dependent upon a written code to enable them to keep the covenant, but would enter a more intimate era characterised by the presence of God in their midst.

*"Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant which I made with their fathers when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant which they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people."* (Jeremiah 31: 31-33)

Texts such as these made it clear to the first Christians that although the Old Testament would remain a foundation document describing God's initial call of his people Israel, it was also a text which had been superseded by the coming of Jesus whose life and death fulfilled the hopes and expectations of the prophets.

The next issue for the early Church was the relationship between Gentile believers and the Law. What should be required of them and which parts of the Law should be deemed to have been superseded? These matters are first recorded as being dealt with formally by the Council of Jerusalem, the primacy of Jesus already being an integral part of the preaching of the Apostles. The Council (Acts 15) dealt with some of the practices that the Gentile converts were to be asked to adopt and became the formal precedent for treating the Old Covenant differently to the New. From this point the split between the testaments would be clear and permanent, marked by different understandings of God, the sacrificial system, the Sabbath, circumcision and so forth. This was inevitable because for Christians the expression of faith did not begin with the giving of the Law and obedience to it, but with the resurrection of Jesus, the knowledge of his presence and the acceptance of salvation. Pertaining to this St. Paul wrote:

*Now before faith came, we were confined under the law, kept under restraint until faith should be revealed. So that the law was our custodian until Christ came, that we might be justified by faith. But*

*now that faith has come, we are no longer under a custodian; for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. (Galatians 3: 23-26)*

The Second Century gnostic Marcion took matters to extremes by abandoning the Old Testament altogether (along with parts of the New Testament which he also rejected). Marcion taught that the God of the New Testament was a God of Love and therefore could not be the same as the God of the Old Testament whom he deemed to be a God of Law. This latter God was the creator of the world (as *demiurge* / fabricator), but was distinct from the 'good God' he proposed to his followers. Therefore he declared that the Old Testament could be abandoned.

The Church rejected such teaching and took a rather more positive attitude towards the Old Testament. It was deemed that Marcion had failed to value the Old Testament as a foundation document which pointed towards the New which would be much harder to interpret without it. It was clear that through the years of the Old Testament the relationship of God with his people was developing and growing and that a knowledge of the discoveries and revelations would enhance the human-divine relationship in every age. God was not an object for examination, but someone to be discovered in a relationship. Considering this, Marcion's abandonment of the Old Testament was simply too brutal. Its various books may have contained an incomplete teaching belonging to a different culture, but they would still make an important contribution to Christian understanding and faith, showing what it had grown from.

St. Paul taught that the will of God was to be found primarily in the Spirit-filled fellowship of the Church and so the New Testament would always have primacy over the Old. Even so, the Church retained the Old Testament as part of the canon of scripture for a number of reasons. The following list is by no means exhaustive.

Over the centuries Christians cherished the Old Testament as an inspired foundation document. The stories of the creation and the patriarchs present an understanding of the origins of the world and the calling of a people by God. For Christians, Abraham is their father 'in faith' who obeyed God's call and trusted in him, something particularly important to non-Jewish believers who could not claim physical descent. For this reason Eastern Orthodox Christians refer to the key Old Testament characters like Abraham, Moses and Elijah by the title 'saint'. They are those who in their lifetimes searched for God, but have now found the fulfilment of their search in Christ. For the Church the whole of the Old Testament is a study of vocation and redemption, providing a template for God's merciful dealing with his people.

The Church has always made great use of the writings of the prophets. The writers of the New Testament took trouble to study the prophets (especially Isaiah) to understand how their proclamations and teaching pointed to the coming of Christ and to his passion. The psalms, being the hymns of the Old Testament, would initially have been a staple part of the worship of the Church as the very first Christians continued to worship in the temple and synagogue until they were finally ejected. The psalms have therefore been cherished ever since as psalms to chant, in metrical versions as hymns or just for private devotion.

The worship of the Church and the decoration of the church building owe a great deal to the life of the first Jerusalem temple. First temple Judaism was, at the time of Jesus, considered by many to be the authentic expression of the faith, focussing on the presence of God. By contrast, second temple Judaism and the synagogue movement focussed more heavily on the reading of the scriptures. As the Church taught that Jesus was God present in the world it was natural to reclaim that primal element by an adoption of aspects of first temple worship. Churches are often therefore decorated with examples of nature, such as foliage on pillars and stars on the ceiling to indicate that they are a microcosm of creation. The reservation of the Blessed Sacrament – the consecrated elements of Holy Communion – is a sign of God's continual presence in the midst of his people, a presence day in and day out, not just a pious hope for the future.

Characters play an important part in understanding the relationship between the testaments. St. John the Baptist is the awaited Elijah figure whilst Jesus is presented variously in the New Testament as the new Moses reinterpreting the Law in the Sermon on the Mount and as the high priest of the order of Melchizedek. For children the figures of Noah and Jonah, rubbing shoulders with Jesus on the drawing paper still figure strongly in their early understanding of the bible, something not to be discounted lightly.

Finally, Christianity has retained the ethical elements of the Law such as the Ten Commandments. This is not a sop to the old, but a reflection of the teaching of St. Paul on the importance of a natural, God-given morality, something which is as evident to the Gentile as it is to the Jew who received the Law at the hands of Moses. According to the Apostle everybody has a natural sense of right and wrong and should live (and be judged) accordingly. The ethical teaching of the Old Testament helps form a universal code of behaviour, enhanced by the forgiveness and mercy expressed in the New.

What is the Christian to make of the Old Testament? It is a foundation for understanding the life and work of Jesus and the things which the Apostles taught about him. It is a sign of hope, telling the long story of God's dealings with his creation and those he calls to know and serve him. Important though it is, the Old Testament does not define the Christian's faith. That role is reserved for Jesus himself, the Word made flesh who died and rose again for the salvation of the world. Without the old, the new would be much harder work, but given a proper understanding of the relationship between the two, God can be praised for fulfilling his promises and bringing the faith to perfection in Jesus.

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