

The Value of the Old Testament (Part 1)

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What are your impressions of the Old Testament? Perhaps your mind goes back to childhood. Sunday school. Bedtime stories. Maybe you roll your eyes in frustration at the thought of studying the Old Testament. You have spent too many Bible studies digging into the details of an all but forgotten prophet. Maybe you enjoy reading the harrowing accounts of David or the turbulent years of the Divided Kingdom. Or, maybe you think the Old Testament teaches good life lessons, but really all we need to read is the New Testament.

When my brother and I were growing up, our parents read stories from the Old Testament to us before bed. I can still see the large bedtime book of Old Testament stories our mom would use. Also, I had a Bible class teacher who made the Old Testament come to life. Her wealth of understanding and ability to connect with children was deeply impressionable. As far back as I can remember, I have had a love for the Old Testament.

As I became older, though, I began to confront a rather negative attitude many Christians had towards the Old Testament. Most would concede that the Old Testament was “written for our learning,” but did not see the value of it to our faith.

Failing to properly appraise the Old Testament will have an impact on how we understand Jesus specifically and the New Testament generally. For example, most of the writers of the New Testament were Jewish. They were raised according to the Law of Moses. They began and ended their days by reciting the Shema. They worshipped at synagogues and the Temple. They hoped for the day that Yahweh would fulfill His covenant by sending the Messiah.

The Jewish people, including Jesus, did not view the Torah as a collection of bedtime stories. The Scriptures were family history and a covenant needing completion. Or, as the Biblical scholar and theologian N.T. Wright puts it, “The Jews were highly aware that they were living in a story that had yet to be finished.” Those who wrote the New Testament were the living fulfillment of the Old Testament. This centuries old document was their foundation of faith in Jesus the Messiah.

The Old Testament & Jesus

Perhaps some would be surprised to know the high value the New Testament gives the Old Testament. Sometimes New Testament authors cite passages from the Old Testament. Other times, they reference the entire body of work by using the phrase “the Scriptures.” Notice how Jesus connected the Old Testament to Himself.

“And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up. And as was his custom, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and he stood up to read. And the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim

good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." And he rolled up the scroll and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. And he began to say to them, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:16-21).

In this text, Jesus went to the synagogue in His hometown. The Old Testament was read regularly at these gatherings. Being able to read, an impressive skill in the ancient world, Jesus read from the prophet Isaiah, chapter sixty-one. Isaiah prophesied extensively about the Messiah. The sixty-first chapter is the climax of God's purposes being completed through the revelation of the Messiah.

Of course, what is striking about Luke's account is not simply that Jesus read from Isaiah. Undoubtedly, numerous Jews had read from this exact text many times. What is striking is Jesus' pronouncement after reading: "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

The audience reacted skeptically and violently at Jesus' words. They recognized that Jesus was claiming to be the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy. However, this claim of Jesus demanded a reanalysis of the entire book of Isaiah, not just a single passage.

Sometimes Jesus broadly connected the Old Testament to Himself. Notice the following:

"Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished" (Matt. 5:17-18).

At this point in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is transitioning from the introduction to the heart of what He wants to teach. To do that, He answers a specific allegation that had been charged against Him: Jesus was attempting to destroy the law and prophets. In other words, Jesus was trying start something entirely new and different; something altogether disconnected from the law and prophets.

This allegation highlights the extent to which the Messiah's connection to the law and prophets was unanticipated and fundamentally misunderstood. Jesus was not attempting to destroy anything, much less the law and prophets. Jesus was coming to fulfill the law and prophets.

This statement of fulfilling the law and prophets is seldom discussed. Given the benefit of hindsight, we tend to make a simple acknowledgment that Jesus fulfilled prophecies concerning the Messiah and quickly move on to something else. However, understanding the deeper meaning of the fulfillment mentioned by Jesus is critical for the sake of our faith.

Jesus did not just fulfill “Messianic prophecies.” He did more than connect the dots. Jesus fulfilled the redemptive plan of God that began in Genesis. Jesus fulfilled the entirety of the Old Testament.

Notice some other examples of Jesus broadly referencing the Scriptures/Old Testament.

“But Jesus answered them, “You are wrong, because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God” (Matt. 22:29).

“You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me” (John 5:39).

On the last day of the feast, the great day, Jesus stood up and cried out, “If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.’” (John 7:37-38).

Conclusion

As Christians, we are part of a long, illustrative history. Our history can be traced back to Genesis. For the sake of understanding the present and future, we need to be informed of the past. Adequately understanding Jesus involves recognizing the complete Biblical framework in which He is presented.

Additionally, concepts of grace, election, and predestination can only be understood through the lens of the Old Testament. Paul writes about what God was actually doing for the world through Israel and how His work was completed through Jesus. These subjects are deep and complex. Our struggle to understand them can partly be traced to a neglect of the Old Testament. We will consider Paul’s use of the Old Testament in the next article.