

The Value of the Old Testament (Part 2)

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The Old Testament is indispensable to our faith. Yet, this book is underappreciated. One reason this is the case relates to our general use of the Bible. In our teaching in preaching, we often “proof-text” our points. We cite a single statement in the Bible that supports our argument. This method isolates passages at the exclusion of context.

In the New Testament, Jesus is explained in the broadest possible context: the Old Testament. Many of the sermons recorded in the New Testament use the Old Testament to explain Jesus. This is the only way Jesus could have been explained. Also, Paul’s letters are commentaries on the Old Testament. He explains the Old Testament through the cross of Jesus. When he cites Old Testament texts, he is not simply “proof-texting.” He is bringing larger Biblical contexts into his densely packed writing. In this article, we will consider how Peter and Paul used the Old Testament to preach Jesus.

Peter & the Old Testament

The apostle Peter was a Jew. He was a common man from the northern region of Galilee. He earned his living as a fisherman. Like any Jew of his day, he too was raised to know Yahweh through the Torah. On the first Pentecost after the resurrection of Jesus, Peter explained this most transformational event by using the Old Testament (Acts 2).

Peter connected the cross of Jesus to the Old Testament. He explained how the strange events of the day had been prophesied by Joel. He used the Psalms and the Davidic Covenant to explain the resurrection of Jesus. This sermon was the first indication to the Jews that the cross of Jesus demanded a reanalysis of the Old Testament. Jesus was not a random anomaly, but the fulfillment of God’s redemptive purposes.

Also, in one of Peter’s letters, he references the prophecy of Scripture. In the following passage, Peter connects the Old Testament prophecy, Jesus, and faith.

2 Pet. 1:16-21: “For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. For when he received honor and glory from God the Father, and the voice was borne to him by the Majestic Glory, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased,” we ourselves heard this very voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain. And we have the prophetic word more fully confirmed, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts, knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.”

Peter writes about the personal impact of the Transfiguration of Jesus. The event was affirming of his faith in Jesus and the prophecy of the Old Testament. Recognizing their faith-building potential, Peter teaches us to pay attention to the prophecy of Scripture.

Paul & the Old Testament

There is no more consequential writer of the New Testament than Paul. Our understanding of Jesus as the Messiah has been indelibly shaped by his writings. Yet, understanding his letters is often difficult. Grasping Paul's teaching for the sake of our faith requires a working knowledge of the Old Testament. This is primarily due to the background of Paul. He was a Jewish scholar/rabbi. As such, he explains Jesus through the lens of the Old Testament.

Paul viewed the Old Testament as a whole. He understood how the individual books of this work were connected. While he could reference specific texts, he valued the entire complication. He often would write about "the Scriptures," meaning Genesis through Malachi. Notice how he uses this phrase in the following passages.

Rom. 1:1-2: "Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures."

1 Cor. 15:3-4: "For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures."

2 Tim. 3:14-17: "But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work."

The Old Testament had been explained for centuries before Paul's time; however, the book had been misinterpreted. When preaching in Antioch of Pisidia, Paul declared, "For those who live in Jerusalem and their rulers, because they did not recognize him nor understand the utterances of the prophets, which are read every Sabbath, fulfilled them by condemning him" (Acts 13:27). With guidance from the Spirit, Paul gives us an accurate analysis of the Old Testament and points us to Jesus.

Conclusion

The Old Testament was invaluable to the writers of the New Testament. If we want to share in their understanding, we must give attention to the Old Testament. This text and Jesus were needed to understand God's redemptive purposes. We cannot understand one without the other. The Old and New Testaments are companions of faith. With a growing appreciation for the Old Testament, our hope will be strengthened: "For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope" (Rom. 15:4).