

## **THE OLD TESTAMENT: OBSOLETE – OR CONTEMPORARY?**

Many Christians have problems with the Old Testament. Some people do not read it. Some people just read the Psalms. Some preachers never, or rarely, preach from the Old Testament.

Some Christians are very happy reading the Old Testament, but their interpretation and application of it is often highly imaginative. Does it matter if your view and interpretation is different from mine? How we are supposed to become people who “correctly handle the word of truth”? (2 Timothy 2:15)

This article cannot completely solve this difficult and complicated problem of how evangelicals in the twenty first century should apply the Old Testament to themselves and their every day lives. However, the intention is to provide some guidelines on how to understand the Old Testament and how to read it for personal benefit, and how to preach from it in church.

There are two common attitudes to the Old Testament among conservative evangelicals, both of which lead to difficulties:

- The Old Testament is the Word of God and therefore of equal value with the New Testament
- The Old Testament is obsolete and has been replaced by the New Testament.

What does the Bible say about itself? What did Jesus have to say about our attitude to the Old Testament ... after all, that was the only part of the Bible available in His time.

### **1. The Name and Contents of the Old Testament**

As you know, the Old Testament was written originally in Hebrew (and a little Aramaic) and the New Testament was written in Greek. Many Christians cannot read Hebrew or Greek and so have to rely on a translation of the Bible. Just comparing a couple of these translations shows us that it is not possible to translate from, say, Greek to English on a word for word basis - if it were, all translations would be the same. Instead, translations have to be made phrase by phrase or, better, idea by idea. Because of this, the same Greek word is translated by different English words in different places in the New Testament or in different versions.

Sometimes a knowledge of the Greek or Hebrew can help us to understand and clarify what the English translation means. At other times, this knowledge doesn't help us very much.

In English, the word “testament” is just about equivalent in meaning to “covenant”. Most people don't use either of them very much in our every day lives.

However, when we refer to the “Old Testament” we are referring to the 39 books in our Bibles, starting with Genesis and ending with Malachi. This is in contrast to the “New Testament” which starts with Matthew and ends with Revelation.

On the other hand, we are more likely to use the expression “the old covenant” to refer to the covenant which God made with the nation of Israel through Moses, in contrast to the “new covenant” which He made through Jesus.

In the English New Testament, “covenant” and “testament” come from the same word (*diatheke*) in Greek. That is why the Authorised Version can refer to “the old testament” in 2 Corinthians 3:14, whereas the NIV refers to “the old covenant”. The next verse says, “Even to this day when Moses is read, a veil covers their hearts” and this shows that the NIV’s phrase is clearer.

Hebrews 8:13 says, “By calling this covenant "new", he has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and ageing will soon disappear.” The translators could have used the word “testament” instead of “covenant”, but it is clear from the context that covenant is the right word to use.

The use of the expression “the Old Testament” to refer to this collection of books is not particularly helpful, exactly because of the potential confusion between the two words. However, it goes back to Origen, who lived in Egypt from AD 185-254, so it would be difficult to start using a different phrase now!

We shall return to this distinction soon, as it is crucial to our understanding of how to interpret the Old Testament and apply it to ourselves.

Another important phrase, which can also cause some problems in its interpretation, is “the Law”. This expression is used in several different ways in the New Testament. Sometimes it refers to the Old Testament legislation (Romans 7:14), sometimes to the first five books (Luke 24:44), and sometimes to the whole of the Old Testament (Matthew 13:52). There isn’t any distinction in the Greek to help us, so we need to decide from the context what is the correct meaning.

Second Timothy 3:16 says, “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness.” Linking this to 2 Peter 3:16 suggests that the whole of our Bibles - the Old and the New Testaments - should be read by Christians and should be helpful to us.

Hebrews 8:13, which we looked at above, says, “By calling this covenant "new", he has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and ageing will soon disappear.” Here is a key point. It is the old covenant which has been made obsolete by the new covenant. This is made very clear by the quotation from Jeremiah 31:31-33 saying “when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt”. This is NOT the same as saying that the Old Testament has been made obsolete by the New Testament. It is the covenant which God made with the nation of Israel at mount Sinai which has been made obsolete by the new covenant established by Jesus.

The central part of this old covenant was the Law which was given to Moses. Therefore this old covenant was and is often referred to as “the Law of Moses” or just “the Law”.

Ephesians 2:15 refers to the work of Jesus as “abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations.” What did Jesus abolish? He abolished the law, the Law of Moses, the old covenant.

Hebrews 7:18 says, “The former regulation is set aside because it was weak and useless (for the law made nothing perfect), and a better hope is introduced, by which we draw near to God.” What is it that is set aside? It is, again, the laws which were given to Moses.

In Matthew 5:21, 22 Jesus says, “You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’ But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment.” Here Jesus says that He is a higher authority than the law of Moses.

Therefore we may see that the laws given to Moses have been abolished and replaced by the teachings of Jesus: “the Law of Christ” (Galatians 6:2). In this context it is again important to remember that two covenants dealing with the same matter and the same people cannot be in place at the same time as this would lead to conflict and confusion. This means that we should not just take the Mosaic laws and apply them directly to Christians ... even though this is often done with the Ten Commandments, for example. We shall return to this question of how we should interpret and apply these parts of the Old Testament later.

On the other hand, we also see that not all of the Old Testament became obsolete. Therefore much of the Old Testament still speaks directly to us. Again, we shall look at how we should read and apply these sections.

## **2. Comparing the old and new covenants (testaments)**

Here are some of the distinguishing marks of the old and the new covenants:

(1) The old (the Decalogue) was written by the finger of God on the tablets of stone (Ex. 31:18), the new is written by the Spirit on the tablets of the heart (2 Cor. 3:3; Heb. 8:10).

(2) The old covenant was called “The Law of Moses” (Acts 13:39), the new is called “The Law of Christ” (Gal. 6:2; 1 Cor. 9:21), “the law of the Spirit of life in Christ” (Rom. 8:2), or “the perfect law of liberty” (James 1:25).

(3) The old covenant brought condemnation and death (Rom 5:20), the new covenant brings with it righteousness and life (2 Cor. 3:7-11)

(4) The old covenant was given through angels (Gal. 3:19), the new was “spoken by the Lord” himself (Heb. 2:1-4).

(5) In the old covenant righteousness meant doing the works of the law, but in the new covenant righteousness is reached by faith in Christ Jesus (Gal 2:11,12).

The covenant made by God with Israel through Moses is then called literally “obsolete” and that means no longer valid (Heb 8:13). This fact is sometimes explained away by dividing the Sinaitic Covenant into three parts: (1) the moral or ethical law – basically the Decalogue, or Ten Commandments, (2) the ritual – e.g. sacrifices and other services in the temple, and (3) the civil law – e.g. the law of inheritance. According to this theory only the two latter parts have been abolished while the first – the Decalogue, or the ethical part – is still valid in full.

The New Testament does not suggest any such division. On the contrary, when Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount speaks of the Law, he changes specifically some of the commandments that are part of the Decalogue. He uses the word “fulfil” (Mat. 5:17) and this fulfilment is interpreted more closely in his next words (Mat 5:21, 27, 33, 38, 43). Here Jesus expands the original meaning of the commandment and gives it a much broader application. The old commandments are changed but the spirit of the Law is upheld.

A Christian reading the Old Testament has also to keep in mind another simple fact, namely that two covenants (agreements) cannot be valid simultaneously. If the New Testament (the new covenant) says the old has been abolished, he must carefully see what it means for the reading, understanding and application of the Old Testament as a book. Of course, this is more easily said than done and it requires knowledge not only of the New Testament text but also of its spirit.

In the following part of this article I give some practical suggestions on how to distinguish between those parts of the Old Testament (39 books, Hebrew *Tenak*) that cannot be abolished or changed and those parts that have been changed or left out by the New Testament. (Talking about “parts” does not mean it is possible to mechanically dissect the Old Testament into neatly separated passages.)

### **3. Unchanged “parts” of the OLD TESTAMENT**

#### **3.1 History**

It is obvious that the recorded history cannot be changed. The Christian reader can find in them the principles of how God is active in the history of mankind, of Israel, or even in the personal story of an individual. Applying the principles taken from a historical narrative he should assess the facts on two levels: the laws and customs valid at the time when the events took place – but also on the level of the New Testament teachings that decide what can be applied by the contemporary Christian in practical living.

#### **3.2 Wisdom literature**

The larger part of the “wisdom literature” (Proverbs, Job, some of the Psalms, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon) is timeless and can be expounded as such. At the same time it is important to note that the theology of the wisdom literature is often derived from the observation of life and nature without direct (or special) revelation from God. It is therefore necessary to compare it with what the New Testament says (if anything) on the topic.

#### **3.3 Prophecy**

There are few things in which we can so well see the sovereignty of God over the world and history as the fulfilled prophecies (historical predictions). Relying on these facts of history we are confidently expecting fulfilment of those prophecies that are still future for us, especially the Second Coming of Jesus (“eschatological” predictions). In spite of all the dangers that go with these expositions, the Church should not leave out this part of the Old Testament from preaching.

#### **3.4 “New Testament” passages in the Old Testament**

We can say that passages which prophetically or in some other way describe New Testament events or conditions are “New Testament” passages in the Old Testament. Isaiah 53 is an

example of this. Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son Isaac is an example of a passage that can be taken as a type of a New Testament event.

### **3.5 The character of God**

The character of God is the same today as it was in the Old Testament. The Father of our Lord Jesus Christ should not be seen as some severe Old Testament deity. To make a contrast between the character of God in the Old Testament and in the New Testament is an old heresy (Marcion). His attributes can be seen in all the parts of the Old Testament – in his work of creation as well as redemption. Especially rich in description of the attributes of God are those parts of the Old Testament where God is in dialogue with man (the Psalms and the prophets). Knowing the character of God is one of the results of salvation in Jesus Christ and the early church was studying it from the Old Testament only.

### **3.6 Spirituality and prayer**

With only a little exaggeration we can say that the Psalms are the prayer book of the church. It is that part of the Old Testament that is most often read from the pulpit. But exposition should go deeper than just saying, "as we see the Psalmist praising God, let us praise God also". For example, in the poetry of the Psalms there are many abrupt changes of emotional attitude. The reader should study why. Expressions of love and praise for God can be used directly in the New Testament sense. The passages of vengeance against enemies have to be read through Jesus' words "love your enemies". (This is a complicated question but the key is always in the New Testament.)

## **4. Abolished or changed "parts" of the Old Testament in the New Testament**

### **4.1 Customary law – up to the time of Moses**

In many things the Patriarchs simply followed the customs of the culture in which they lived. In these things we have to understand that their righteousness before God was not in their works but in their faith (Gen. 15:6). To follow these customs today would not only be contrary to the New Testament but even contrary to the Law of Moses.

### **4.2 Promises given to the physical Israel**

Although it is true that the Church is the circumcision (Phil. 3:3), it is obvious from a closer look that some of the promises can be fulfilled only in Israel as a physical (as opposed to the spiritual) nation. When expounding these passages it is more advisable to discuss God's relations with Israel than to spiritualize them and try to apply them to the church as "the spiritual Israel". (How this is done will depend largely on the theological position of the reader in the problem of the relationship between Israel and the Church.)

### **4.3 The Law of Moses (Sinaitic covenant)**

Any commandments of the Sinaitic covenant which are valid in the New Testament must be repeated in some form in it. In other words, we cannot say something is in force now just because it was not specifically cancelled. The important guide how to understand this principle is the Sermon on the Mount, that shows how the spirit of the Old Testament Law is fulfilled in the New Testament.

The problem of the Sabbath is difficult to solve because although it is a part of Sinaitic legislation that is not repeated in the New Testament. However it is also a part of the creation

narrative (Gen 1). This means that the Sabbath belongs to the order of the old creation and, although it is not commanded in the New Testament, and so it is not a condition for salvation, it is wise to celebrate it in some form as an institution of God.

This short attempt to show “how to read the Old Testament with New Testament eyes” cannot get into the difficult questions of hermeneutics. But the above mentioned principles can be used as the basis for further study of this matter.

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