

When My Old Testament Became Christian

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Jesus didn't grow up studying the Gospel of John, 2 Corinthians, or Hebrews. Instead, books like Leviticus, Psalms, and Isaiah shaped our Savior's mission and understanding of God and his ways. What we call the Old Testament was Jesus's only Bible. He summarized it as "the Law and the Prophets," which he saw as lastingly relevant for his followers: "I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them" (Matthew 5:17). He also stressed that Moses's instructions continue to matter today: "Whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:19).

Later, when Paul took his three missionary journeys, Matthew's Gospel did not yet exist, and there was no book of Revelation. Yet Christians still had authoritative sacred writings, for Paul could declare, "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" (Romans 15:4; see also 1 Corinthians 10:11). The same apostle could stress (with the Old Testament principally in view) that "all Scripture is . . . profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness," and he could urge his pastoral apprentice, "Preach the word!" (2 Timothy 3:16; 4:2).

Awed and Asking New Questions

These ideas were new for me in the autumn of 1995, when my wife and I moved to New England and I began my MDiv at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. Until that time, I knew the Old Testament declared the global problem of sin for which Christ was the saving solution. I also knew that the initial part of my Bible was filled with stories like the exodus (Exodus 14–15), David's defeat of Goliath (1 Samuel 17), and Daniel's deliverance from the lions' den (Daniel 6) — all of which displayed God's kindness and greatness.

Yet it was during that initial fall semester of seminary, sitting in Theology of the Pentateuch, that my heart first began to burn, awed by God's glory and amazed at Scripture's unity and story climaxing in Christ. Other classes — on biblical theology, Hebrew and Greek language, Old and New Testament exegesis, and the New Testament's use of the Old — overwhelmed me with the perfections of divine beauty and with the purposes of God from Genesis to Revelation.

Yet I still had so many questions, especially related to how the biblical covenants progress and interrelate. What was the church to do with Old Testament laws and promises — especially those given to a different people under a different covenant? How does old-covenant Israel relate to the new-covenant church? Should Scripture's teaching and progression lead me to become a Baptist or a Presbyterian? In salvation, how should we understand the doctrine of imputation, and how do justification and sanctification relate?

Such queries swirled in my head as I came to the end of my graduate studies. But what was still missing at this time was sustained, dependent reflection on the significance of Jesus Christ, whose person and work alone supply answers to these important questions. Another five years would pass before I would have a conversation that would reorient my life onto a new path.

Equipped to Magnify God's Majesty

In 2000 I began my PhD at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, majoring in Old Testament Literature and minoring in both Old Testament Language and New Testament Theology, the latter because I always wanted to have a grasp of “the whole counsel of God” for the church (Acts 20:27). I went deep and far, growing much and ever maintaining my conviction that the Bible in its entirety is God’s written word.

As a minister, I wanted to study God’s word carefully, practice it rightly, and teach it faithfully — in that order (Ezra 7:10). I resolved that in my instruction, counseling, and writing I would join Paul in declaring, “We have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God’s word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone’s conscience in the sight of God” (2 Corinthians 4:2). Careful exegesis of Galatians 3 and whole-Bible theology made me a convictional Baptist, and I fell more in love with the wondrous glory of our holy, holy, holy God.

Along with my doctoral courses and teaching ministry as an associate pastor, John Piper’s *Desiring God*, *Future Grace*, *Pleasures of God*, and *Brothers, We Are Not Professionals* developed my doctrinal sensitivities and expanded my capacity for treasuring God in his matchless worth. They also shaped within me a rock-solid theology of suffering that prepared me for future ministry and for leading my family through life’s storms. Yet there was something — or someone — still missing from the center of my solar system. I still needed to see that “God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Corinthians 4:6). We fully and properly encounter God’s glory by looking at Jesus.

‘Very Little About Jesus’

In the summer of 2005, my family of five moved to Minneapolis, Minnesota, so I could begin my first full-time teaching post as an Old Testament professor. Upon my request (and with some help from Tom Schreiner), John Piper agreed to have lunch with me. I shared with him and Justin Taylor, his assistant at the time, how much a passion for God’s glory had captured me and how eager I was to proclaim the beauties and bigness of God from the initial three-fourths of the Bible.

After listening for a while, Pastor John asked Justin if he had any reflections. Justin offered a single statement that shook me to the core and that God used to reorient my affections and set me on a path of discovery and awe that I am still journeying today. He said, “I hear a lot about God’s glory and very little about Jesus.”

Through Christ and for Christ

In the weeks and months that followed, I considered whether, as a Christian, my interpretive approach and ministry practice aligned with the truth that there were “mysteries” kept secret in the Old Testament that only the lens of Christ’s coming could disclose (Romans 16:25–26), thus making the apostolic witness necessary for properly grasping all that God wants us to gain from the Old Testament (Acts 2:42; Ephesians 2:20).

Stated differently, did I interpret and preach old-covenant materials in a way that embraced the twin realities that only spiritual people can read a spiritual book (1 Corinthians 2:13–14) and that

only through Christ does God lift the veil, enabling those once spiritually blind to fully understand and apply the Old Testament's significance (2 Corinthians 3:14–15)? Was I seeking a knowledge of God's glory "in the face of Jesus" (2 Corinthians 4:6)?

Furthermore, did I rightly see that God designed the whole Old Testament to move us to magnify the Messiah, savoring Jesus as the climax of Old Testament history (Mark 1:15; Galatians 4:4), the focus of Old Testament prophecies (Matthew 11:13; Luke 16:16; Acts 3:18, 24), the Yes of every promise (2 Corinthians 1:20), and the end of old-covenant law (Romans 10:4; Galatians 3:24–26)? Indeed, God created all things (including the Old Testament) in the Son, through the Son, and for the Son (Colossians 1:16). The very Spirit that guided the Old Testament prophets ever seeks the Son's glory (John 16:13–14; 1 Corinthians 12:3; 2 Corinthians 3:18).

Jesus stands as both the answer key and the hermeneutical algorithm for rightly interpreting the Old Testament (2 Corinthians 3:14). We must read the Old Testament through Christ and for Christ. It was at this time that I began to see the Old Testament for the Christian Scripture it is.

Over the next many years, my family and I were active members at Bethlehem Baptist Church, feasting week by week on John Piper's preaching ministry and enjoying the fellowship of saints who cherished Christ and God's work in the world. In 2009 I became one of the founding professors of Bethlehem College and Seminary, and I continued to grow in my understanding of how the Testaments relate and how the Old Testament is, as my friend Jim Hamilton likes to say, "a messianic document written from a messianic perspective to instill messianic hope."

After the early Christians met the resurrected Christ, they gained understanding into the true meaning of the Old Testament, seeing in it a message of the Messiah's suffering and triumph and the universal mission he would spark (Luke 24:45–47; Acts 26:22–23). This is not a message forced upon the Old Testament from the outside. No! Through the Old Testament prophets, God promised the gospel of Jesus we now celebrate (Romans 1:1–3). Yet even in the promise, God maintained the "mystery . . . kept secret for long ages" — the mystery that is now being made known to all nations "through the prophetic writings" themselves (Romans 16:25–26)!

Whether a pastor or Bible-study leader, a stay-at-home mom or a businessman, if you are a Christian, the Old Testament is for you. Read Genesis considering how Abraham saw and rejoiced in Jesus's day (John 8:56), even if from afar (Matthew 13:17; Hebrews 11:13). When reading of Israel's wilderness journey or through Moses's Deuteronomic sermons, be ever mindful that Moses wrote of Christ (John 1:45; 5:46–47). Look for how books like Judges, Esther, and Ecclesiastes bear witness about Jesus (John 5:39), and study Jeremiah, Habakkuk, and Malachi convinced with Peter that "all the prophets" spoke of Christ's suffering, the church's rise, and the forgiveness that all believers can enjoy through Jesus (Acts 3:18, 24; 10:43). As you do, you will increasingly "behold the king in his beauty" (Isaiah 33:17), and your life will never be the same (2 Corinthians 3:18).

Every Page Christian

As many Old Testament texts make clear (for example, Deuteronomy 30:6, 8; Isaiah 29:18; 30:8; Jeremiah 30:2–3, 24; Daniel 12:9–10), God revealed to the prophets that "they were serving not themselves but you" as they carefully searched their Scriptures to discern more about the person of Christ, the time of his coming, and the glories that would follow (1 Peter 1:10–12).

Getting the Old Testament right demands that we keep Christ at the center (1 Corinthians 2:2; Colossians 1:28). We must account for how redemptive history progresses through the various covenants climaxing in Christ. A wrong view of Jesus's person and work will lead to a wrong view of salvation, missions, Christian ethics, the appropriation of biblical promises, the roles of men and women, the church's governance and makeup, the church's relationship to Israel and the state, and so much more. But when Jesus is elevated as both the necessary light and lens, we are equipped with God's help to answer such questions, ever delighting in all Christian Scripture — both the Old and New Testaments.

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