

## THE OLD TESTAMENT AS CHRISTIAN SCRIPTURE

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In this short essay, I aim to explain to you one of my basic convictions about how a Christian should receive the Old Testament; and I hope that if I show you the exegetical payoff of diligently following through on that conviction, you will want to embrace that conviction yourself.

My conviction, simply stated, is that you do not have to “do” anything to the Old Testament to *make* it Christian Scripture: it already *is* Christian Scripture by virtue of its being the front end of the story into which we Christians have been engrafted. That conviction, properly understood, then guides us in how we receive the Old Testament, how we apply it, and how we should preach it.

I will argue for this conviction, first by showing that it does justice to the way the New Testament itself speaks of the Old, and second by showing that the chief alternative does not survive close examination.

Most Christians are confident that since the Old Testament is part of the Christian canon, it is Christian Scripture in some way or another. The difficulty is in ascertaining just what way actually works. Some think that the Old Testament is more “law,” while the New is more “gospel.” We find some authors suggesting that, even though there is a gracious principle behind the Old Testament, and the Sinai Covenant that is at its center, nevertheless this covenant includes a “republication of the covenant of works.” This is based on the way Paul cites Leviticus 18:5 (“You shall therefore keep my statutes and my rules; if a person does them, he shall live by them”) in Romans 10:5 and Galatians 3:12 – though in my judgment, Paul is not here pronouncing on what he thinks the Sinai Covenant is in itself, but on what it has become in the hands of his interlocutors. In its own context, Leviticus 18:5 deals with what we would call “perseverance,” that is, with how one who is already a member of the people of God should live out his membership. Apparently, some in Paul’s day turned this into a way of *earning* life, which Leviticus does not say.

But these approaches to the Old Testament as more-law-than-gospel flounder as well on the simple fact that the Sinai Covenant is founded on God’s gracious initiative and continued forgiveness to his people, as God himself explains to Moses (Exod 34:6-7):

<sup>6</sup>The LORD passed before him and proclaimed, “The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, <sup>7</sup>keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear *the guilty*, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children’s children, to the third and the fourth generation.”

The words “the guilty” in verse 7 are not in the Hebrew text, but are supplied for sense, based on the LXX τὸν ἔνοχον. Such a “guilty” person is not just one who has sins to be forgiven, but one who remains in those sins through impenitence. By the same token, those who receive the beneficence described in verses 6-7a are not the morally qualified, but the penitent (see how Psalm 32 uses this text to

make just this point). The ideas in this text underlie many of the psalms, which shows that this text provides a basic confession of faith for the Old Testament.

Now, there is plenty of moral instruction in the Old Testament, but we would make a mistake if we thought its primary purpose was to establish a standard to which people had to live up in order to qualify for membership in the people of God. Rather, it is first and foremost the loving instruction of the Creator, portraying the image of properly functioning human life – an image toward which the faithful members of his people are being molded as they obey. Thus, moral instruction, even moral demand, are not in contrast to redemptive grace, but part and parcel of it.

We now turn, as many do, to Luke 24:25-27, in which Jesus is speaking to a pair of his disciples on the road to Emmaus:

<sup>25</sup>And he [Jesus] said to them, “O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! <sup>26</sup>Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?” <sup>27</sup>And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself.

Later on in verses 44-47, he speaks to the whole group of disciples:

<sup>44</sup>Then he said to them, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.” <sup>45</sup>Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, <sup>46</sup>and said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, <sup>47</sup>and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.

I will first explain what I think Luke wanted us to see, and then I will show why I think a common way of taking these words does not help us.

It seems clear to me that there are specific Old Testament texts that speak of a coming Messiah, such as Isaiah 9:6-7, to name no others. But the majority of the Old Testament cannot be made “Messianic” in this sense without doing violence to the texts themselves. Do they then have no bearing on Jesus? Or is this actually inviting us to find a Messianic meaning where the ancient audience could not have seen one?

The answer comes from appreciating that the Old Testament is best characterized as “a long story in search of an ending” (the phrase comes from N. T. Wright). Quite simply, after his resurrection Jesus explains to his followers that his death and resurrection, with his consequent taking the throne of David, are where the Old Testament story was headed – as anyone who read the Old Testament properly should acknowledge (but not necessarily have foreseen in quite this shape). That is, beyond the particular texts that “predicted” the Messiah, there is the whole flow of the Old Testament’s grand story.

And what is that grand story? We have one true and living God who made mankind to know and love him, and the world as a fit place for that to happen. The sin of our first parents did not change that basic plan, although it made it necessary for God to redeem man – to provide forgiveness, rescue, and newness of life – if man were to know him and live in his presence. Thus we have God’s

plan to form a redeemed people, to protect that people, to shape and purify it, and to use it to reach the rest of mankind. Calling Abram was a key step in this process, setting him up as the headwaters for this people, and Israel is the coming to fruition of this plan. It was always inherent in this plan that the one people, Israel, was to be the channel through which true knowledge of God came to all the world (compare Gen 12:1-3; Exod 19:4-6); the means by which this was to come about was their faithful living out of the covenant, to display to everyone who could see what properly functioning humanity looks like. The story of Israel is a record of tragic failures to live this pattern out, and thus to carry out the mission. Nevertheless the Messianic hope was centered on a future figure who would lead Israel in fulfilling its mission: as king he would embody the ideal for true humanity and he would bring the Gentiles into his empire. The anticipated "Messianic era" would be the time in which the ultimate heir of David would occupy his throne and lead his people in achieving this task.

When New Testament authors speak of "the gospel," they are not usually talking about the way by which an individual gets his sins forgiven, but instead about the report that this great era has begun through the death and resurrection of Jesus (see Rom 1:1-6, where Paul actually explains what he means by "gospel"). This is why the New Testament spends so much energy over the question of how Gentile and Jewish Christians are to relate to one another in the people of God. Paul describes Gentiles as having been grafted in to the olive tree that is the people of God from the time of the patriarchs (Rom 11:17). This means that the Old Testament story is now their history as well, since they are full members of the people of God (Eph 2:19). When Paul speaks of a "mystery," he does not refer to the inclusion of the Gentiles in the people of God, which the Old Testament had made abundantly clear, but to the full citizenship in that people that they have along with believing Jews (Eph 3:4-6).

That is the sense in which the whole Old Testament story was leading to the resurrection of Jesus. You can see that in the context of Luke 24, when verse 47 says that "repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name *to all nations*, beginning from Jerusalem." That is, through the resurrection Jesus has entered his Davidic kingship, and the time for reaching the Gentiles has now come. (Compare Matt 28:18-20, which makes the same point.)

This means, as I have indicated already, that a Gentile Christian receives the Old Testament as the first part of the story into which he has been engrafted. We receive a story of our own history in a number of ways: we recognize the twists and turns the story took, the many ways in which it could have turned out otherwise and perhaps *should* have been otherwise (contingency); and, if we are theists, we stand in awe at the way these unlikely events display God's purpose, and thus see ourselves as the products of his purpose. Further, we reflect on the heroic deeds, and on the shameful ones as well, and we feel ourselves responsible heirs – to live worthily of the heroism and to undo the effects of the shameful ones. And we see ourselves, not only as heirs, but also as participants and stewards: we want to play our part well in order to pass the story on to following generations in better shape (or at least no worse shape) than it was when it came to us.

Since we are talking about the Christian story, we can add a few more specific elements. The story is about a corporate entity, the people of God, and it helps us to see what membership in that people involves, such as personal faith, penitence, and loyalty, and our connection to other members. It shows us that God has committed himself to his people, and that my great privilege is membership in that people. At the same time my well-being is tied to the well-being of the whole people, and I contribute to that whole by my own faithfulness. God has kept his promises, as my very existence as a Christian shows. Besides that, I realize that the people receive God's blessings, not simply for themselves, but also to be the vehicle of blessing to the rest of the world. I am in a stage of the story that is different from that of the Old Testament, in that Jesus is on David's throne and is about the work of bringing the Gentiles into his empire – an empire that is no longer defined by a particular geographical or political boundary. So I carry the story forward, not just by personal faithfulness, but also by contributing to the expansion of that empire among my fellow Gentiles (always with a view toward Jews as well, Rom 11:23).

Not everything in the Old Testament is "story," of course: there are laws, whose purpose was to protect equity and civility in the theocracy (rather than to spell out the moral ideal); there is wisdom that helps us to live well daily; there are hymns that the people of God sing in corporate worship; there are poems celebrating such wonders as romantic love; and lots more. So I would not advocate reading the Old Testament *as* a story; instead, I would read its parts *in relation to* its story. By that I mean, I would see the parts in relation to the Big Story that unifies the whole: the proverbs help me to live my little story in such a way as to contribute to the Big Story. The Psalms – many of which explicitly recount parts of the Big Story – help me live as a member of the worshipping corporate entity, the people of God. The Big Story tells me that God's purpose is to restore my humanity to its proper function, and thus it reminds me of the human nature I share with every other human being, and of the duty of seeking his or her good. To enjoy the love of my Christian spouse is a way of experiencing my renewed humanity, that also advertises God's goodness to the rest of the world. This is why we may say that the Sinai Covenant is done away with, because it was focused on the theocracy, which had an end in mind from the beginning – and yet it has embedded in it principles that cannot pass away, because they are part of the larger story of which the Sinai Covenant is one chapter.

This approach does justice, as I see it, to the historical sequence in which the books of the Bible came; to the overarching structure of the Bible as a "play in five acts" (again borrowing terminology from N. T. Wright); to the words of Jesus reported in Luke; and to the way the New Testament authors commonly use the Old Testament. This last is too big a subject for now, but just consider how the apostles argued in the synagogues to prove that Jesus is the Christ (as in Acts 17:3; 18:28): how could they hold anyone responsible for not seeing something that was not there until the apostles came along to put it there? And how could Luke justly praise the Berean Jews, who examined the Scriptures in order to verify what the apostles were saying? That is, we do best when we

mimic the first audiences of the New Testament, and read the New in the light of the Old, rather than the other way around (yes, I know there is more to be said, but not right now).

And yet for all this, there is another popular way to apply Luke 24 to Old Testament exegesis – a way that is popular, and perhaps appealing in some ways (not least because it is “easier” than what I have advocated), but a way that ultimately fails to do justice either to the Old Testament or to the New.

Some people put verses 27 and 44 of Luke 24 together, and come to the conclusion that in order to see the Old Testament properly we must “find Christ” in its passages – that is, find the ways in which the persons, institutions, and events “foreshadow” or “anticipate” some aspect of the incarnation or sacrifice of Christ. For example, if we read God’s instruction to Abram, “walk before me and be blameless” (Gen 17:1), we may conclude that Abram was unable to do this, and so are we, but Jesus has done it in our place, thus fulfilling the requirement of the Abrahamic covenant on our behalf and securing our standing with God. In the same way the wisdom of Proverbs functions mostly as a description of Jesus, because no mere man could “live up to its requirements.”

This approach stems from a worthy impulse, namely to do justice to the words of Jesus in Luke 24; but there are so many things wrong with it that one hardly knows where to begin. For one thing, it misunderstands the nature of God’s word to Abram: the LORD is telling Abram what it means to be a partner in the covenant God is making through Abram for the sake of the whole world. In other words, it focuses on the response side: the covenant member embraces the covenant by walking before God, his Creator and gracious Redeemer, and aiming to be blameless – where blamelessness is understood as integrity in one’s participation in the life of the covenant. That is, neither walking before God nor blamelessness is a qualification for membership; they are what faithful membership will actually bring a person to be and do. (We may apply the same argument to the discussion of wisdom.)

Further, this kind of approach assumes that God lays down conditions to be met in order to qualify for membership in a covenant. But he does not: when God made his covenant with Adam, he did not say, do this in order to deserve something; the condition is that of perseverance in the relationship. The call to Abram in Genesis 12:1-3 is all about God’s promises, but Abram will not receive them unless he leaves. But leaving is not the way one *earns* the blessings; it is rather what it means to receive them. Likewise, Abram will not realize the blessing of offspring unless he gets cozy with Sarai. We may put it this way: any covenant God makes with mankind will be conditional, in the sense that it calls for a response from the covenant members. And yet that conditionality is not a matter of merit, but of instrumentality – that is, the condition describes what it means to receive the blessing, not how one deserves the blessing. And this is no different for us: when the apostles called people to believe in Christ, they were offering a blessing that was unconditional in terms of merit, because no one could deserve it. At the same time, no one receives the blessing without receiving the blessing, which is what believing is. Likewise, when Paul tells the

Colossian Christians that he will present them holy and blameless and above reproach to God, *if* indeed they continue in the faith (Col 1:23), he is not talking about them deserving that presentation, but rather he is honoring the human activity of believing and remaining in the way (what John calls “abiding”).

There is more: this faulty approach really disregards the place the Old Testament passage comes in the unfolding story. Rather than becoming a record of God’s word to Abram which Moses recorded for the sake of those who followed him out of Egypt, it holds little meaning for them – except perhaps to tell them of how hard it is to be God’s people, and to instill in them a sense of God’s awesomely demanding nature. This then makes very little of the original intent of the passage, unless we think it was Moses’ purpose to instill these ideas in Israel – but such a purpose finds no support from the context. The burden of the Pentateuch is to help the people of Israel grasp that they exist as God’s new humanity for the sake of the whole world, and that the gracious covenant calls for a response from them. (Once we diverge from original intent, we have no way of discerning whether our interpretation is valid or not; in fact, we make the Scripture a wax nose that we can shape any way we like. What right do we have to assume that our “evangelical” shape is any more responsible than some other? We appeal to the New Testament – but how do we know we have read that properly, unless we can appeal to original intent?)

Finally, consider what this other approach ends up saying about God. He gave his word to the ancient people of Israel, but that word really had no meaning for them – the “true” meaning could not have been known until Jesus sent his apostles to explain his work. So not only does the text not have any meaning within its own context, it has nothing really to offer to the ancient people who first received it. I do not know how we can legitimately attribute goodness to God under such circumstances. (I say “legitimately” because I know that advocates of this approach do in fact attribute goodness, though I find them inconsistent.)

You can see this, for example, in the impulse to read the Joseph story “in the light of Christ,” which under this approach means taking Joseph as a “type” of Christ. But then of course the Joseph story finds its meaning outside of the historical communication from God through Moses to the ancient people of Israel – at least they would have been surprised if you told them that Jesus is what the Joseph story is “really” about. And not only that, but you would not learn anything about Jesus from this exercise, since you would be reading into Joseph what you already think about Jesus; and to do this you would have to sanitize the actual Joseph story, making believe the shortcomings of this man are actually virtues, or else ignoring them. And then the distinctive contribution of the Joseph story would be lost. (What *is* it about? Well, about how God intends to use his people to bring blessing to the Gentiles, and how they will ideally do so – through faith, even in terrible circumstances, through diligence, honesty, and moral purity. There is more to say, but not here.)