

Kingdom, Covenants & Canon of the Old Testament

Lesson 1

Why Study the Old Testament?

Manuscript



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Lesson One

Why Study the Old Testament?

INTRODUCTION

If we were to ask people with no traditional Jewish or Christian background, “Why should someone study the Old Testament?” most would probably say something like this: “The Old Testament is so old and irrelevant that it isn’t worth reading much at all.” Now as followers of Christ, we receive the Old Testament as the Word of God. It’s sacred Scripture. But, as surprising as that may sound, even when we ask Christians, “Why should we study the Old Testament?” at best some of us would say, “Well, there are a few things here and there that are still important for us today.” But all too often, even sincere Christians say, “The Old Testament is so old that it isn’t worth reading much at all.” So why should followers of Christ today study the Old Testament?

This lesson is the first in our series *Kingdom, Covenants & Canon of the Old Testament* — a series exploring the themes of God’s kingdom and covenants and how these themes are applied in the books of the Old Testament canon. This first lesson will address a crucial preliminary question: “Why Study the Old Testament?” Why should modern followers of Christ be interested in this part of the Bible? Why should we devote ourselves to the task of studying these ancient Scriptures?

From the outset, we should admit that studying the Old Testament isn’t the easiest thing in the world to do. It’s especially challenging because the canon of the Old Testament consists of many books, written by different authors, who addressed different historical circumstances, over a period of nearly 1000 years. But, as we’ll see in this series, we can make great strides when we realize one thing: All of these books rest on a set of basic beliefs that all Old Testament authors held in common. They all believed that God administered his relationship with Israel by means of policies that he established through his covenants. And beyond this, they also believed that these covenants were designed to accomplish God’s grand goal for history — to glorify himself by turning all of creation into his kingdom. Old Testament authors drew upon their basic beliefs in God’s kingdom and covenants as they addressed specific situations in the books of the Old Testament canon.

As we ask the question, “Why Study the Old Testament?” we’ll focus on three main issues. First, we’ll acknowledge that we must devote ourselves to study because of the distance separating us from the Old Testament. Second, we’ll see that followers of Christ should take up this task because of the relevance of the Old Testament Scriptures for our day. And third, we’ll explore why we must also study in order to make responsible applications of the Old Testament to our lives. Let’s begin with the reality that the Scriptures of the Old Testament often seem very distant from us.

DISTANCE

Students of the Bible often go through a similar, almost predictable process when they begin to study the Old Testament. We're rightly taught that the Old Testament is the infallible and inspired Word of God, so many of us assume that these Scriptures must contain teachings that are easily applied to the Christian life. Now, so long as we're highly selective and we only talk about broad topics like the attributes of God, or God's commandments like, "You shall not steal" or "You shall not murder," it seems like we're in familiar territory. But something happens when we study the Old Testament more carefully. When we delve into more details, we find that many portions of the Old Testament present outlooks that are not familiar. In fact, the more we read it, the more it feels like we're exploring an ancient, distant world.

We'll look into the Old Testament's distance from us in two ways. First, we'll touch on the causes of this distance — why do these Scriptures often seem so foreign to us? And second, we'll explore the kinds of distance we encounter. What types of outlooks in the Old Testament make it seem so very different from what we believe as modern Christians? Let's look first at some of the main causes or reasons for the distance between ourselves and the Old Testament.

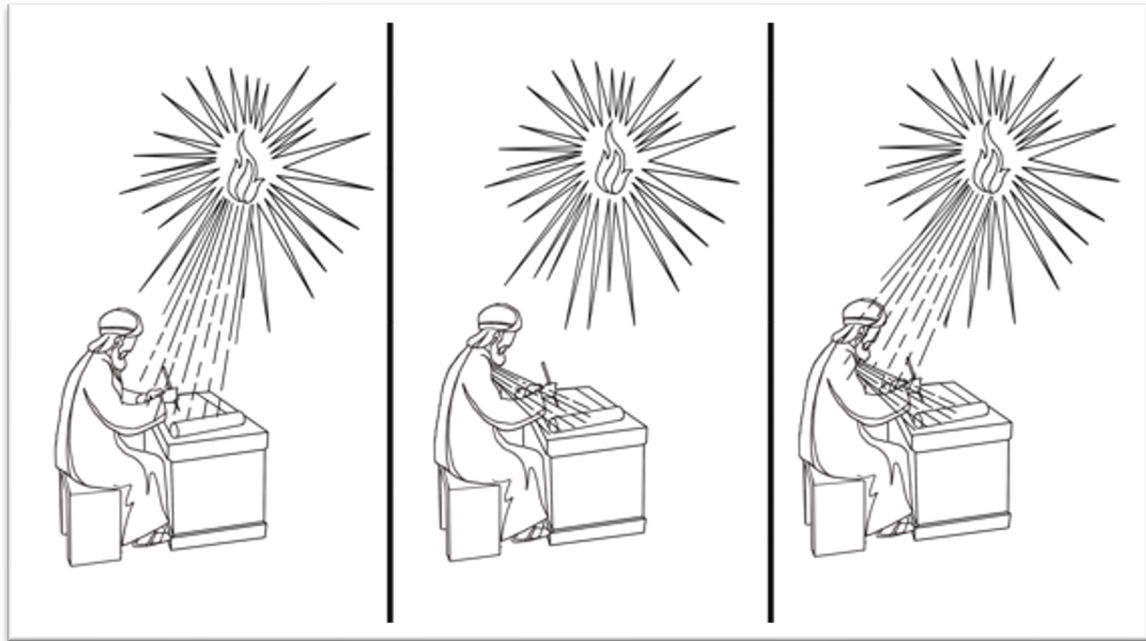
CAUSES

At least two factors often cause us to feel distant from the Old Testament. On the one hand, God gave these Scriptures to humanity through a process known as organic inspiration. And on the other hand, God designed the Old Testament to fulfill its purpose through a process known as divine accommodation. These characteristics of the Old Testament explain many of the challenges we face as we study this part of the Bible. Consider first the process of organic inspiration.

Organic Inspiration

It's common to describe the historical evangelical view of the divine inspiration of Scripture as "organic inspiration." While we affirm that the Holy Spirit inspired the Scriptures, we use this terminology to indicate that his inspiration was not divorced from the personalities, experiences and intentions of human authors. That is to say, under the special, infallible supervision of the Holy Spirit, the human authors themselves determined what to write. The Bible did not result from "mechanical" inspiration, as if God used human writers as passive conduits. Nor was the Bible romantically inspired, as if God merely encouraged biblical authors to write, much like we speak of musicians or artists "finding" inspiration. Instead, God meticulously controlled the content of Scripture so that it is without error and may rightly be called the Word of God. But he also employed the individual personalities, experiences and purposes of the human writers so that we may also rightly speak of the Scriptures as the words of holy men.

Types of Inspiration



Mechanical
(God dictates)

Romantic
(God suggests)

Organic
(God employs)

Consider the way Peter spoke of Paul's letters in 2 Peter 3:15-16. There we read these words:

Count the patience of our Lord as salvation, just as our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, as he does in all his letters when he speaks in them of these matters. There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures (2 Peter 3:15-16).

In these verses, the apostle Peter confirmed that Paul's letters were written with the wisdom *given* to Paul by God. In other words, God's Spirit inspired Paul's letters so that they were not mere human writings, but writings from God. Yet, Peter also affirmed that Paul's personality came through these epistles. Notice how he put it: "Paul also wrote to you according to the wisdom given *him*." These Scriptures were still Paul's letters. We can see, then, that from Peter's point of view, the apostle Paul's letters resulted from a process involving both God and his human writer.

This same outlook is true of the Old Testament as well. This is why Old Testament law is not only called the law of God, but also the Law of Moses. It came from God *and* Moses. This is why many Psalms are called Psalms of David. The organic view of inspiration also explains why biblical authors spoke of human authors like Isaiah, Jeremiah

and Daniel. Although God was the ultimate author of the Old Testament, he employed holy prophets to write these books in ways that reflected who they were, and where and when they lived.

When you think about it, it isn't hard to see why the Bible's organic inspiration distances us from the Old Testament. All the authors of the Old Testament were ancient people. They lived in the world of the ancient Near East and, in many respects, they thought and wrote like the people in those days. And more than this, Old Testament authors wrote before the coming of Christ. They didn't have a fully-developed New Testament Christian theology like we do. As a result, when you and I study the Old Testament, we soon begin to see that the world of the Old Testament was very different from our modern world.

The Old Testament Jews were living by the 600-plus Levitical laws which governed every aspect, moral, civil, spiritual, of their lives, which governed the relationships of men and women, animals, farming, feast... So, all those issues are crucial to our interpretation and understanding and not, again, trying to place a 21st century world into the first century or into the B.C. world.

— Dr. Thaddeus J. James, Jr.

In addition to the challenges created by the organic inspiration of biblical authors, we should recognize that another cause of our sense of distance from the Old Testament is divine accommodation.

Divine Accommodation

Broadly speaking, “accommodation” is a term that theologians use to describe the fact that every time God reveals himself to humanity, he speaks to us in finite human terms. Because God is transcendent and incomprehensible, whenever he reveals himself, he condescends to us in ways that finite human beings can understand. Otherwise, we wouldn't be able to understand him at all. You'll recall that in Isaiah 55:8-9 we read these words:

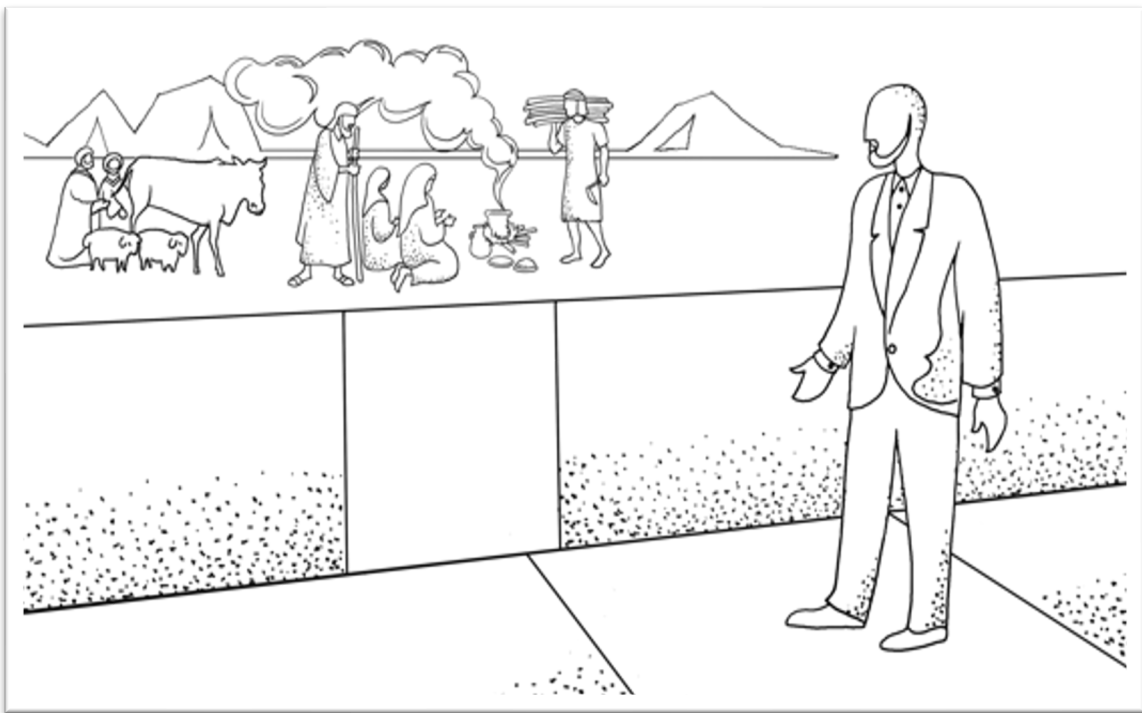
For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts (Isaiah 55:8-9).

God's thoughts and ways are so transcendent — they so infinitely exceed our limitations — that every revelation he has ever made has been accommodated to human capacities. He did this so that at least some of us could understand and follow what he revealed.

Now, it's important to realize that in the Old Testament God didn't accommodate himself simply to the limits of humanity in a broad, general sense. Rather, he also accommodated himself to the specific historical situations of Israel living in the ancient Near East. He designed Old Testament Scriptures to be understood, in the first place, by ancient Israelites.

Because the primary audience of the Old Testament was ancient Jews, God had the Old Testament written in Hebrew and Aramaic. God gave the Ten Commandments on stones because it was an international custom for important national documents, including royal laws, to be displayed in this way. And, in many respects the literary styles of Old Testament narrative, poetry, wisdom literature, and law followed many literary conventions that were common in the ancient Near East. In these and many other ways, God accommodated the Old Testament to his ancient people so that they could understand it.

For this reason, as you and I study the Old Testament as modern people, we constantly encounter the fact that it was accommodated to people who lived *long* ago. It was specifically written in the first place to address the ancient people of Israel.



We often sense great distance between ourselves and the Old Testament and need something to bridge the gap.

Every book in the Bible was written to an original audience, and we here in the 21st century are not the original audience. I think it's interesting and maybe helpful to us to realize that the majority of the individual books in the New Testament are epistles or letters, so when we read those epistles — and I think you could expand that to the whole

Bible ... we're reading other people's mail. They are for us because we belong to the church, but they were first written to an original audience.

— Dr. Robert MacEwan

Now that we've seen some of the causes of the Old Testament's distance from us, we should turn to our second subject: the kinds or types of distance we often find between ourselves and the Old Testament. What kinds of things do we encounter in the Old Testament that seem foreign to us?

KINDS

It's good to admit that the Old Testament often seems distant to us as modern people. But this reality can also lead to confusion, and it can even discourage us from studying this part of the Bible. One helpful way to avoid becoming disheartened is to identify the kinds of things in the Old Testament that make us feel this way. When we know the kinds of distance that we often encounter, we'll be better equipped to understand and to apply these Scriptures to our lives.

There are many ways to catalog the main kinds of distance between us and the Old Testament, but for our purposes, we'll just speak of three: first, theological distance; second, cultural distance; and third, personal distance. These three types of distance interconnect in many ways. But for the sake of discussion we'll deal with them one by one, starting with the theological distance that confronts us as we study the Old Testament.

Theological

When we speak of theological distance, we're thinking primarily about the differences between the revelation that Old Testament authors received and the fuller revelation that we've received in Christ. Every Christian realizes that the Old Testament presents theological viewpoints that don't, at first, appear to correspond with the teachings of the New Testament. Consider just a few examples.

In Genesis 22, God called Abraham to sacrifice his son, and God blessed him for his willingness to do it. But what would we think about someone today who believed that God had called him to sacrifice his son? We wouldn't even begin to take such a theological claim seriously.

In the days of Moses, God expected his faithful people to march as a great army from Egypt to the Promised Land. But we certainly would think it strange if we found a group of Christians literally marching through the wilderness of Sinai to reach the Promised Land.

In the Old Testament, we read of men devoting themselves to God's service by making Nazarite vows not to cut their hair. Or we learn that God ordained the temple in Jerusalem as the *only* place where his people were to worship. We read that God required

his people to sacrifice animals as atonement for sins, and that he commanded the wholesale destruction of Canaanite cities, including women and children.

Aren't we all a bit puzzled that the Old Testament calls us to believe God revealed such things when they seem so different from what he has revealed in the New Testament? The list of these kinds of theological differences goes on and on. Whatever else we may say, there is certainly great theological distance between us and the Old Testament.

As God reveals himself to us, he does so in space and time... You think of the practice of the old covenant, where certain food laws were practiced and certain clean/unclean rituals. That was to be practiced by the Old Testament Israelites, yet, that variety is not necessary for us to practice today given the covenantal changes. One can do these kind of things, but it's not necessary. It's not covenantally significant. In fact, you're to be very, very careful that when you demand people to do them because the Old Testament says to do these things, you could be falling into, say ... "Where in order to have a right relationship with God we must come under the old covenant which now has been brought to fulfillment." So, some of those variety of practices are not necessary because of covenantal changes.

— Dr. Stephen J. Wellum

In addition to theological distance, another kind of distance that separates us from the Old Testament is the cultural distance between the ancient Near East and our modern world.

Cultural

Cultural distance between ourselves and the Old Testament exists because human cultures are constantly changing. Social structures shift. Older customs seem odd and outdated. Imagine visiting your own country just 200 years ago. Many of the differences would make us feel as if we're in a different world, even though we are simply in a slightly different era. Now, if this is true of 200 years ago in the same place, how much more should we expect to find cultural differences between ourselves and what we read in the Old Testament? So many differences exist between the ancient Near East and our modern world that many things we read in the Old Testament are strikingly unfamiliar.

We feel cultural distance when the Old Testament describes life in various places in the ancient world, whether in Israel, Canaan, Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Persia or the many other cultures mentioned in the Old Testament. The characters we encounter had countless cultural beliefs, values and practices, just like we do today. But they were often very different from our modern cultural beliefs, values and practices. Consider just a few examples of human culture that appear in the Old Testament:

Much of the Old Testament describes an agrarian world. We read about farming and animal husbandry throughout the pages of Scripture, but many modern urban people can barely imagine what went on in this ancient lifestyle. Technologies were also very

different in the days of the Old Testament. The technologies that many of us rely on today to communicate, work and function simply did not exist in ancient times.

In the Old Testament, we read about arranged marriages. We also learn that important biblical figures practiced polygamy. Various forms of slavery appear in the Old Testament. And both within Israel and outside of Israel, cultures were deeply impacted by the political realities of imperialism. There were exceptions to the rule, of course, especially among desert tribes, but great kings or emperors and their powerful armies play a crucial role throughout these Scriptures. The characters of the Old Testament knew practically nothing about modern democratic ideals.

When we see these and similar features of Old Testament life, we're often left wondering how to handle them. What are we to do with a Bible that is so deeply embedded in cultures that were so different from our own? Cultural differences cause us to sense an enormous gap between ourselves and the Old Testament.

I think if you look back, for example, to the Old Testament, you'll find that there are things there that are so different from our setting today. For one thing, the Old Testament was quite agricultural in its setting and practices... Secondly, for example, the practice of polygamy was quite common... And so that's culturally distant from us.

— Dr. Luis Orteza

Having considered how theology and culture in the Old Testament often seem strange to us, we should look at a third kind of distance — what we may call “personal” distance.

Personal

When we speak of “personal” distance, we refer to the fact that people who lived in the days of the Old Testament were different from modern people. Many of the gaps between us and them often involve very personal, human factors. Of course, the people of the Old Testament were not entirely different from us. As we'll see later in this lesson, they were similar to us in a number of important ways. But at the same time, they had strikingly different personal experiences that made them quite different from who we are today.

We shouldn't be surprised that people in Old Testament times were different from people in our day. After all, many of their dispositions and activities grew out of the theological and cultural world in which they lived. Think about it this way: On a theological level, many individuals in the Old Testament had remarkable spiritual experiences unlike any that we have today. They had visions of heaven and heard the audible voice of God. They interacted with heavenly beings. Stop for a moment and ask yourself, how would you be different if you had these kinds of spiritual experiences? What kind of person would you be if you had experienced divinely inspired visions, auditions, angels and demons and the like? Without doubt, such experiences would change us dramatically. Realizing this truth helps us recognize that we are different from the people of the Old Testament in many significant ways.

More than this, consider how we are different from Old Testament people because of cultural influences. In the Old Testament, people often filled cultural roles that are foreign to us. They were kings, queens, servants and slaves. Men and women viewed their roles very differently than we view our roles today. The personalities of Old Testament people were deeply impacted by the horrors of ancient warfare. Going through famines and droughts without the aid of modern technology affected the physical and emotional health of ancient peoples. Many of us today have never faced these kinds of situations. And as a result, we often have a hard time identifying with people described in the Old Testament.

Now that we've acknowledged the causes and kinds of distance that separate the Old Testament from us, we should turn to our second topic: the relevance of the Old Testament for modern people. If the Old Testament was written so long ago, why should we have any expectation that it's still relevant for us today?

RELEVANCE

There are countless reasons why Christians should expect the Old Testament to have significance for their lives. But perhaps the most important piece of evidence comes from Jesus and his first century apostles and prophets. These men confidently taught that the Old Testament was not simply God's authoritative Word for ancient Israel, but that it was God's Word for Christians in their day as well. Many Christians today believe that the New Testament was given to do away with the Old Testament. But in reality, Jesus and his apostles and prophets said just the opposite. They taught that the Old Testament is crucial for faithful Christian living in every age.

The New Testament teaches in many places that the Old Testament has relevance for our lives, but we'll look in just two directions. First, we'll look at some of the teachings of Jesus, and second, we'll consider some of the teachings of the apostle Paul. Let's think first about Jesus' teachings regarding the Old Testament's relevance.

TEACHINGS OF JESUS

To understand what Jesus taught about the relevance and authority of the Old Testament for his followers, we'll look briefly into two sides of his teaching. We'll start with some passages that often appear to be negative comments Jesus made about the Old Testament. And then, we'll examine his clearly positive affirmations of the Old Testament's relevance. Let's begin with some of Jesus' comments that many interpreters have taken as negative outlooks on the Old Testament.

Negative Comments

Most of us are familiar with Jesus' Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5–7. At one point in this Sermon, Jesus touched on several ethical issues. His approach to these issues has left many well-meaning believers with the impression that Jesus opposed or corrected

the teachings of the Old Testament. Listen to these familiar passages. In Matthew 5:21-22 we read these words about murder:

You have heard that it was said to those of old, “You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.” But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment (Matthew 5:21-22).

In Matthew 5:27-28 Jesus referred to adultery in this way:

You have heard that it was said, “You shall not commit adultery.” But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart (Matthew 5:27-28).

In Matthew 5:31-32 he spoke of divorce:

It was also said, “Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.” But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery (Matthew 5:31-32).

In Matthew 5:33-34 we see the pattern again as Jesus addressed oaths:

Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, “You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn.” But I say to you, Do not take an oath at all (Matthew 5:33-34).

Jesus also spoke of revenge in Matthew 5:38-39:

You have heard that it was said, “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.” But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also (Matthew 5:38-39).

And finally, Christ addressed the issue of love for enemies in this way in Matthew 5:43-44:

You have heard that it was said, “You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.” But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you (Matthew 5:43-44).

All followers of Christ should agree that Jesus is God’s supreme revelation and that his teachings were much fuller than the teachings of the Old Testament. He penetrated to the heart and expanded to the farthest horizons in ways that the Old Testament never reached. But unfortunately, many Christians have concluded that Jesus’ view on murder, adultery, divorce, oaths, revenge and love for enemies actually contradicted the Old Testament.

Many believers mistakenly believe that Jesus rejected Old Testament teachings in favor of his own, more comprehensive instructions. Now, if this popular outlook is anywhere near the truth, then we have good reason to think that Jesus came to turn us away

from the ethical authority of the Old Testament. But when we reflect more closely on what Jesus actually said in Matthew 5, we discover that this outlook is far from adequate. Jesus didn't contradict *any* of the Old Testament in any way. Rather, he affirmed its authority and contradicted common misunderstandings of the Old Testament in his day.

Instead of disagreeing with the Old Testament, Jesus objected to the ways that many scribes and Pharisees *interpreted* the Old Testament in his day. At the time of Jesus, few people had direct access to the Bible. For this reason, ordinary people in Israel relied heavily on the oral instructions of their religious leaders. But rather than teaching from the Old Testament itself, the scribes and Pharisees often based their instruction on traditions they had *added* to the Old Testament. Sadly, these traditions tended to focus on outward obedience rather than on the condition of the heart — a primary concern in both Jesus' teaching and in the Old Testament.

In general terms, Jesus contrasted his own teachings — which were in harmony with the Old Testament — with points of view that had been “*said*” and “*heard*.” In other words, he was addressing oral traditions. When Jesus and other New Testament figures referred to the Old Testament, they always spoke of what was “*written*” or “*read*.” And nowhere in the New Testament does Jesus refute anything introduced in that manner. So, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus wasn't disagreeing with what was *written* in the Old Testament, but rather with the oral traditions perpetuated by other teachers in Israel. In this light, we should look more closely at what Jesus actually said about these oral interpretations.

When Jesus speaks in the Sermon on the Mount using this phrase, “You have heard it said, but I say to you” he was not saying that the Old Testament Law is now being nullified. In fact, he says quite the opposite very explicitly, that “I have come to fulfill the Law.” But what Jesus is doing is he is using a well-known rabbinic technique that teachers of the Law would use to talk about their own teaching authority. “You’ve heard different people in the tradition say these things about the teachings of the Law, but I say to you...” And that comes with a present authority, with additional authority. And so, Jesus is establishing his teaching authority with this well-known teaching technique, not to discount the Old Testament Law, but to say something very important theologically and Christologically — that it’s important to interpret the Old Testament Law in relation to me and to my teaching of the Law.

— Dr. Gregory R. Perry

Let's think again about the contrasts that Jesus drew. With respect to the issue of murder, many people believe that Jesus expanded the prohibition against murder to include hatred. But it's important to realize that the Old Testament not only condemned murder; it also condemned discord among God's people.



The Old Testament opposes murder and discord.

The ideal of harmony and peace among God's people is expressed well in Psalm 133:1 that says:

How good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity! (Psalm 133:1).

Popular traditions in Jesus' day excused hatred and discord among the Jews so long as they didn't lead to physical murder. By contrast, Jesus reasserted the *actual* Old Testament standards by associating the prohibition against murder with the prohibition against hatred.



The Old Testament opposes adultery and coveting.

Regarding adultery, many people mistakenly believe that Jesus went beyond the Old Testament prohibition against physical adultery to include adultery of the heart. But in Exodus 20:17, the tenth commandment states:

You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his male servant, or his female servant, or his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is your neighbor's (Exodus 20:17).

Here, the Old Testament explicitly prohibited coveting someone's spouse — in other words, adultery of the heart. Jesus' argument was not a denial of Old Testament law, but a reassertion of it.

With respect to divorce, in Jesus' day many religious leaders in Israel believed that a man could divorce his wife for practically any cause. They taught that Old Testament legislation gave them this right, so long as they issued proper legal papers. But the Old Testament indicates clearly that God did not approve of such behavior. As we read in Malachi 2:16:

"I hate divorce," says the Lord, the God of Israel (Malachi 2:16; NASB).

In Matthew 19:3-9 Jesus explained his position on divorce in more detail. There he made it clear that his opposition to divorce was based on the Old Testament itself, particularly on the creation narrative involving Adam and Eve.



The Old Testament opposes divorce.

Regarding the practice of taking oaths, some rabbis in Jesus' day taught that lying was permitted so long as one did not swear to keep his word. Jesus disagreed with this teaching and insisted that the Old Testament prohibited all lying, not just lies that violate oaths. For instance, Proverbs 6:16-17 begins:



The Old Testament opposes lying.

There are six things that the Lord hates, seven that are an abomination to him: haughty eyes, a lying tongue ... (Proverbs 6:16-17).

This is why Jesus went on to say in Matthew 5:37:

Let what you say be simply “Yes” or “No” (Matthew 5:37)

Jesus didn't disagree with the Old Testament, but showed that the oral traditions of the scribes and Pharisees fell short of Old Testament standards.

Concerning revenge, the original Old Testament legislation about “eye for eye,” in Exodus 21:24, had been taken in Jesus' day as God's approval of personal revenge. It was believed that every time anyone did anything wrong to you, you had a right to do something equally harmful to them. But originally, “eye for eye” was part of Moses' legislation for judges. It was designed to guide judges in the official courts of Israel. As in our own day, judges were to render their verdicts and punishments fairly and proportionally to the crimes committed.

Moses didn't intend for this standard to apply to interpersonal affairs. Instead, the Old Testament taught that kindness and mercy were to guide behavior for ordinary, daily life. As Leviticus 19:18 says:



The Old Testament opposes revenge.

You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people ... I am the Lord (Leviticus 19:18).



The Old Testament encourages kindness to enemies.

Jesus disagreed with the false interpretation of a law that was intended for judges to follow in their courts, and he affirmed the Old Testament teaching that we are to show kindness in interpersonal relationships.

Finally, regarding love for enemies, some teachers in Jesus' day taught that it was acceptable to hate their enemies. They apparently inferred from the commandment of Leviticus 19:18 — “love your neighbor as yourself” —

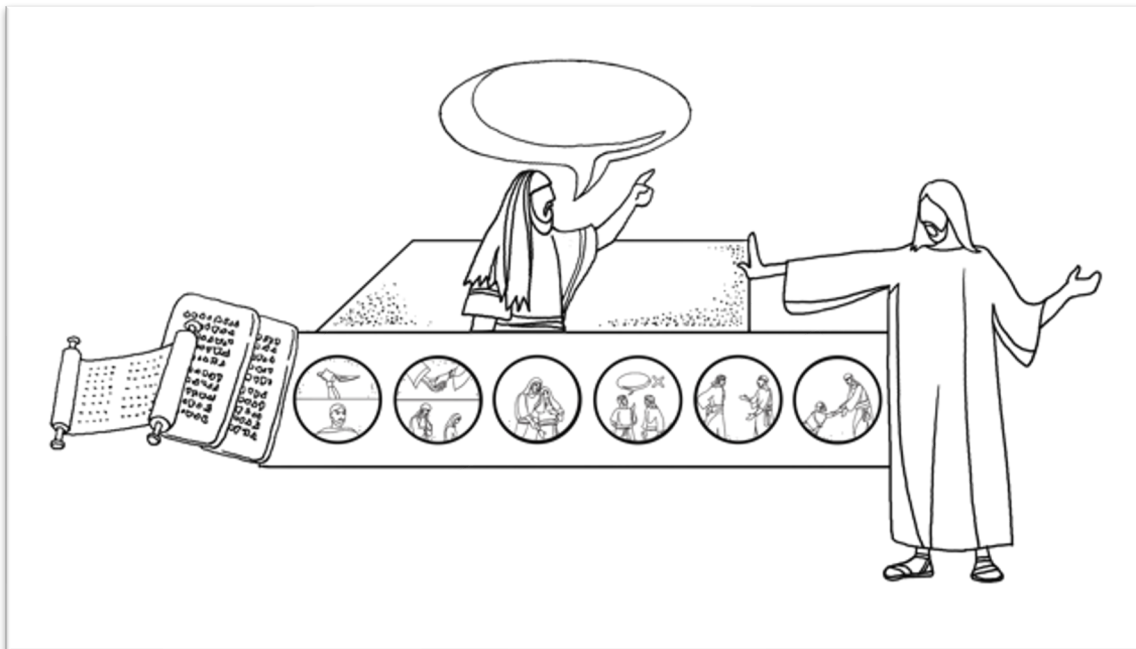
that it was equally appropriate to hate your enemies. But the Old Testament encourages us to love our enemies. For instance, in Exodus 23:4 we read:

If you meet your enemy's ox or his donkey going astray, you shall bring it back to him (Exodus 23:4).

So, as we've just seen, Jesus didn't contrast his own views with those of the Old Testament. Instead, he opposed the false *interpretations* of his day and reasserted the true teachings of the Old Testament.

When Jesus presents these “You have heard that it was said, but now I tell you” statements in the Sermon on the Mount, I think that the best way to look at this is that Jesus is getting at the true meaning of the Law. Not that he's introducing something new, but that he is expositing, in a sense, what God was aiming at all along. So that when the Law says, “You shall not commit adultery,” God never intended his people to think that they could get away with looking lustfully at women who are not their wives, or even looking lustfully at their own wives. So, Jesus is not introducing a new requirement, he's making plain what's already inherent in the Law.

— Dr. James M. Hamilton



Jesus opposed false interpretations, not the Old Testament itself.

Now that we've looked at a few of Jesus' teachings that many wrongly regard as Jesus' negative comments about the Old Testament, we should turn to several passages in which Jesus made positive affirmations of the Old Testament's authority and relevance for everyone who follows him.

Positive Affirmations

There are countless passages in the Gospels that clearly demonstrate Christ's positive outlook on the full authority and relevance of Old Testament Scriptures. He frequently referred to the Old Testament as the basis of his own teachings. And we mustn't forget the scene on the Mount of Transfiguration where Jesus stood between Moses the lawgiver and Elijah the prophet. All four gospels stress Jesus' perfect righteousness — his complete submission to the law and the prophets. Jesus lived in submission to the teaching of the Old Testament. He came to fulfill them all and he called his disciples to do the same.

Listen to what Jesus said in Matthew 5:17-18:

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 (Matthew 5:17-18).

Here Jesus *insisted* that he did not come to do away with “the Law or the Prophets” — a common way to refer to the entire Old Testament in the first century. In fact, we can translate the opening of verse 17, not simply as “Do not think” but as, “Do not [even begin to] think ...” So, when Jesus went on to say that even the smallest letter or stroke of the Law will remain in force “until all is accomplished,” he fully affirmed the Old Testament Scriptures. Unfortunately, many Christians read these verses and think that Jesus meant something like, “I have not come to get rid of the Old Testament but to render it irrelevant.” But this was hardly the case. Listen to the words Jesus spoke next in Matthew 5:19:

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).

Notice what Jesus said in this passage. If people fail to keep, or if they encourage others to ignore, even the least of the commandments, they will be “least in the kingdom of heaven.” And whoever keeps, and teaches others to keep, even the least of the commandments will be “great in the kingdom of heaven.”

Jesus knew something about the Jews in his day that's true of believers today as well. We all tend to be very selective in applying the Old Testament to our lives. We tend to pay attention to those parts that we like and ignore, or even reject, those parts that we don't like. But Jesus insisted that his disciples should affirm and follow every detail of the entire Old Testament, not just some parts of it.

Listen to the way he put it in Matthew 5:20:

I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 5:20).

Followers of Christ must not fall into the hypocrisy of claiming to believe that the Old Testament is the Word of God, but failing to obey it.

With regard to the Old Testament, Jesus himself in Luke 24, the risen Jesus, takes the disciples there on the Emmaus road back through a Bible study of the Old Testament, and he shows them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself. Now, that must mean that Jesus saw the Old Testament as important, as pointing to him. And it's almost as if he's saying, "Look, you may have the resurrection, my resurrection, and that's marvelous, but don't think because you've now got me, you don't need the text, you don't need the background book. On the contrary, you need it all the more to understand me and to understand God's purposes for the world." So, we see Jesus affirming the Old Testament then, and in many other instances. I mean, when he's tempted, he just keeps repeating, "It is written... It is written... It is written..." This is the Master showing us that if he was submitted to Scripture, how much more do we his followers need to be.

— Dr. Peter Walker

Now that we've seen how the teachings of Jesus affirmed the Old Testament's relevance for us today, we should turn briefly to another portion of the New Testament, the teachings of the apostle Paul.

TEACHINGS OF PAUL

By and large, evangelical Christians depend heavily on the letters of Paul in the New Testament. But we tend to misunderstand Paul's attitude toward the relevance of the Old Testament for Christian living. Time and again, well-meaning Christians have argued that Paul set Christ's followers free from the authority of the Old Testament. But, as many interpreters have pointed out, there was perfect harmony between Paul and Jesus in these matters. Like Jesus, Paul opposed the ways many in his day mishandled Old Testament Scriptures, but he insisted on their unquestionable authority and relevance for Christian living.

We'll explore the teachings of Paul in the same way that we investigated Jesus' outlooks on these matters. First, we'll look at a passage where Paul appears to have made negative comments about the Old Testament. Second, we'll consider some of his positive affirmations of the relevance of the Old Testament for Christ's followers. Consider first how Paul appears to have made negative comments about the Old Testament.

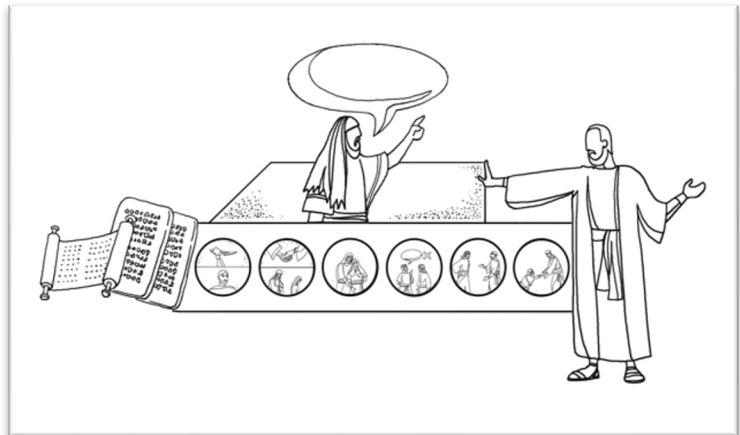
Negative Comments

Listen to these well-known words from Galatians 3:1-5.

O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified. Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh? Did you suffer so many things in vain — if indeed it was in vain? Does he who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you do so by works of the law, or by hearing with faith? (Galatians 3:1-5).

Notice that in this passage the apostle contrasted “works of the law” and “faith.” Many have assumed this contrast set the moral teachings of the Old Testament against the moral instructions of the New Testament or Christian way of life.

These and similar statements in Paul’s writings have led many to think that Paul rejected the relevance of the Old Testament in favor of radically different teachings of the Christian faith. In fact, many Christians argue that treating the Old Testament as if it offers authoritative guidance is to turn from the gospel. Yet, we have to look more carefully at the whole letter of Galatians, as well as other portions of Paul’s epistles. There, we find that, just like Jesus, Paul was not opposed to the Old Testament itself. He was opposed to its abuse. Paul stood firmly against the *misuse* of the Old Testament as a guide for meritorious, legalistic religion. Listen to the way Paul addressed the churches of Galatia later in Galatians 3:10-13:



Like Christ, Paul opposed false interpretations, not the Old Testament itself.

All who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, “Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them.” Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for “The righteous shall live by faith.” But the law is not of faith, rather “The one who does them shall live by them.” Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us — for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree” (Galatians 3:10-13).

As this passage indicates, Paul opposed the false teachers who relied on obedience to the law for their justification. When this is our orientation, we’re cursed because we’ll

never obey God's law perfectly. The only way to escape the curse of the law is through faith in Christ who took the curse of God upon himself.

Paul never opposed the Old Testament itself. He never considered the teaching of the Old Testament to be irrelevant for Christians. Rather, he opposed the false teachers who claimed that salvation depended on obedience to the law instead of faith in Christ. In fact, in his letter to the Galatians, Paul actually appealed to the Old Testament to prove his New Testament principle that justification before God is by faith alone. Listen again to Paul's words in Galatians 3:11 where he quoted Habakkuk 2:4:

The righteous shall live by faith (Galatians 3:11).

In much the same way, Paul illustrated this Old Testament principle using the life of Abraham in Romans 4:1-12. From his point of view, the New Testament teaching of justification by faith alone was actually rooted in the teaching of the Old Testament.

Paul ... was an apostle to the Gentiles but also loved his own countrymen, his own Jewish people. He wanted them to see, he wanted them to come to a living relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ, was at pains in trying to show them that actually their heritage, which is the Old Testament, teaches that actually people are saved by faith alone, and he found key patriarchs of the faith such as Abraham, for example, that even our great father Abraham was saved by faith. That was one of the important things for Paul, to convince his own countrymen that the message he was teaching is actually rooted in the Old Testament and that Jesus is the fulfillment of the Old Testament. So, it was important for him to actually use the Old Testament to illustrate that message of salvation by faith alone.

— Dr. Vuyani Sindo

Paul loved the Old Testament, including the Law of Moses. In Romans 7:12 he wrote that the law is "holy and righteous and good." But when we misuse God's law as a way of earning salvation, we twist it into something it was never intended to be. Throughout the Old Testament, people were saved from God's judgment by God's grace through faith in God's promise of the Messiah to come in the future. Obedience to God's law was to be their response of gratitude for the grace by which they were saved. Even today we need to acknowledge this distinction. Old Testament moral instructions are relevant for Christians, not as a way of earning salvation, but as the way to show our gratitude for the salvation we have freely received in Christ.

Having seen that the negative comments about the Old Testament in Paul's teachings were actually about the *misuse* of the Old Testament as a system of works-righteousness, now we should look at the apostle's strong, positive affirmations of the Old Testament's authority and relevance for followers of Christ.

Positive Affirmations

Paul was Jewish. He always was Jewish. His background was Jewish... He talks about his Jewishness. He was committed to the Scriptures. In Philippians he says as a Pharisee he was committed to that. When he tells the story in Galatians of his background he talks about his zeal far exceeded his peers in knowing his ancestors. And he's talking about Judaism there. He's talking about committing himself to the teachings of the Old Testament, the teachings of the Hebrew Bible. And it's his Jewish background that comes into his teaching of who Jesus is when he goes to the Gentiles. When he goes to the nations, he wants them to understand that the coming of Jesus was the coming of the Jewish Messiah, that the coming of the gospel to the nations was the fulfillment of the promises made to Abraham... He doesn't reject the Scriptures, but he now understands them anew. He understands that Jesus is the fulfillment of everything the Hebrew Bible spoke to.

— Dr. Mark A. Jennings

Consider what Paul wrote about the Old Testament in Romans 15:4:

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 (Romans 15:4).

When Paul spoke here of what “was written in former days” and “the Scriptures,” he had in mind the Old Testament. According to this passage, the Old Testament is essential to developing and maintaining our Christian hope. The stories, the laws, the psalms, the prophecies of the Old Testament, are “for our instruction.”

But without a doubt, Paul delivered his strongest and clearest affirmation of the relevance of the Old Testament in 2 Timothy 3:16-17. Here he wrote:

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 (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

Most Christians are familiar with this verse, but we often imagine that the words “all Scripture” refer to the New Testament. Well, there's no doubt that these words have implications for our outlooks on the New Testament. But when Paul wrote to Timothy about “all Scripture,” he had in mind especially the Old Testament. Listen to the wonderful things that the Old Testament is able to give us — It is able to teach, offer reproof, correct and train in righteousness, equipping us for every good work. In short, Paul said the Old Testament was indispensable to Christian living.

So, when Paul says, “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, and correcting, and rebuking and training in righteousness,”

he's talking about the Old Testament. He's talking about the Old Testament's relevance. And he says that it is not only relevant, but that it is thoroughly relevant... Without the Old Testament, we don't have any context for understanding various terms that the New Testament uses. For example, God — Who is this God? Or Christ — What is a Christ? Or concepts like sin, salvation, even the gospel. These are all terms that are introduced and developed in the Old Testament, and it's only by understanding their use in the Old Testament that we can read the New Testament in an informed and responsible way.

— Dr. Matthew Newkirk

We've seen that we should study the Old Testament because of the challenge of its distance and the expectation of its relevance. Now, let's turn to our third main topic in this lesson: the task of making applications of the Old Testament to our lives today.

APPLICATION

It's one thing to say, as we should, that the Old Testament is relevant for Christians today, but it's quite another to put this truth into practice. Sometimes it's not difficult to see how the Old Testament applies to us, but other times it's very difficult because of the distance between us and the Old Testament. Now, it's reassuring that the Holy Spirit helps followers of Christ study and apply the Old Testament. He teaches us in ways that go far beyond what we could accomplish in our own strength. But it's our responsibility to study the Old Testament as deeply as we can so that we can apply it rightly to our lives today.

The apostle Paul spoke of this responsibility to Timothy. In 2 Timothy 2:15, Paul said:

Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth (2 Timothy 2:15).

As Paul put it here, to be approved, we must approach the Old Testament as “a worker” — *ergates* (ἐργάτης) in Greek — meaning a laborer who works diligently to rightly handle God's word.

We'll look into the modern application of the Old Testament in three steps. First, we'll identify the challenges we must overcome as we try to apply the Old Testament to our lives. Second, we'll consider the connections that make it possible to apply it to our day. And third, we'll examine the developments that we must acknowledge as we apply it. Let's begin with the challenges we face as we apply the Old Testament to our lives today.

CHALLENGES

As we saw earlier in this lesson, God first gave the Old Testament to his people who lived long ago so that they could live by it in their own times. But as we've also seen, he gave these Scriptures to *us* as well so that we could live by them in *our* own times. But we live in a world that is very different from the world of the Old Testament. There's a large gap between us and the Old Testament that we must take into view as we apply the Old Testament. Listen to 1 Corinthians 10:11 where the apostle Paul summarized the challenge of Christian application of the Old Testament. There he wrote:

These things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come (1 Corinthians 10:11).

From the larger context of this passage, we learn that Paul had in mind Old Testament narratives about Israel's exodus from Egypt and how they applied to the Corinthian Christians. Notice that he highlighted at least three things. First, he spoke of the events in the distant past saying, "These things happened ... they were written down." Second, Paul referred to himself and his fellow Christians at Corinth saying that the stories "were written down for our instruction." And third, Paul acknowledged that much had happened between the Old Testament days and the Christian age by describing Christ's followers as those "on whom the end of the ages has come." Christians live at the end of the ages of history, in the times of the fulfillment of history. The apostle's words here disclose the challenge of modern application of the Old Testament.

I love what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 10. So, in 1 Corinthians 10 he's reflecting on the history of Israel and the fact that this history is written down in the Old Testament Scriptures, and he says to the Corinthians, to largely former pagans, to Gentiles, "These things happened, and they were written down for our instruction." So, Scripture is authoritative over people, even though, in the first instance those people were not in view, but God had them in view. God is sovereign over the recording of Scripture, and in his mind he can intend, even though it's written to a different audience initially, he can intend it to be addressed to us.

— Dr. Stephen E. Witmer

As Paul's words suggest, to meet the challenges of applying the Old Testament to our day, we must deal with three things. First, we must understand the ancient world of the Old Testament; second, we must consider the historical developments between us and that ancient world; and third, we must bring what we learn through these developments to our world. Consider first how important it is to pay attention to the ancient world of the Old Testament.

Ancient World

One of our principal tasks is to interpret the Old Testament as much as we can in terms of the ancient world to which it was first given. But, even if we work hard at this, we will never do it perfectly. We're so deeply influenced by the world in which we live today that we'll always come to the ancient texts of Scripture with modern predispositions that we can't fully escape. Unfortunately, this fact is often taken as a justification for simply reading what we believe as modern people into the Old Testament. But to do this makes the Scriptures subject to us, rather than us subject to the Scriptures. So, while we can't fully escape our modern biases, all faithful students should study Old Testament passages diligently to understand their original meaning as much as possible.

Put simply, the original meaning of an Old Testament passage is the impact that God and his inspired writers designed the text to have on its first audience. In a very important sense, we're not hearing God and his inspired writers speaking directly to us; we're overhearing them speaking to others. So, as we study the Old Testament, it's crucial to ask questions like: What were the priorities of the first audience? What did they believe? What were their situations? How did God call them to submit to him in their day? Answering these kinds of questions isn't always easy. But pursuing original meaning sets the course for all modern application.

Once we give adequate attention to the ancient world of the Old Testament, we need to face the challenge of dealing with the historical developments that have taken place between Old Testament times and our day.

Historical Developments

Unlike the holy books of some other religions, the theological teachings of the Old Testament developed over time. The Old Testament refers to the many ways God revealed truths about himself, the world and people beginning in primeval times. It then continues with God's revelations in the days of Israel's patriarchs, in the days of Moses, and during the time when Israel entered the Promised Land. But it doesn't stop there. We also see God's revelations in the era of Israel's monarchy, during the tragedy of Israel's exile from the Promised Land, and finally in the times of struggle that occurred after some Israelites returned to the Promised Land. It was not as if God revealed something to his people once and never said anything related to that theme or topic again. On the contrary, within the Old Testament itself, God continued to reveal more and more.

Beyond this, very significant developments in biblical faith also appear in the teachings of the New Testament. The New Testament acknowledges the authority of the Old Testament, but it also reveals further developments in New Testament times. So, every time we apply a passage of the Old Testament to our lives today, we must move beyond its original meaning and consider the manifold historical developments that took place between the ancient Old Testament world and our modern world.

Biblical faith didn't remain the same through the centuries, but it was not as if God started one religion, discarded it, and then replaced it with another. The Bible represents one growing religion or faith. Theologians often describe the developments of biblical faith as organic — it grew much like a tree grows from a seed to full maturity. When you think

about it, a seed looks very different from the mature tree that grows from it. At every stage of growth, there are differences. But it remains one organism, one plant. In much the same way, later portions of the Old Testament are different from earlier portions. And the New Testament is different from the Old Testament. But these differences reflect organic growth. Our faith grew from one seed planted long ago, matured throughout the Old Testament and reached maturity in the New Testament.

There is a progress in how God reveals himself. The Bible shows this, what we call, “organic growth” where doctrines and themes and ideas about God grow from seed to full form, and so the Bible even talks about its own progressive message. And so, yes, there is a form of progression within the Bible and within the Pentateuch. It’s a movement from the beginnings of God’s revelation to the full flowering, if you will, if you can imagine a time lapse photo of a flower blossoming.

— Rev. Michael J. Glodo

As we can see, to face the challenges of modern application, we must not only pay attention to the ancient world of the Old Testament and the historical developments that took place in the Scriptures themselves. We must also remain firmly committed to the fact that God inspired the Old Testament to be written with our world in mind.

Our World

As Paul put it in 1 Corinthians 10:11, the Old Testament was “written down for our instruction.” This fact requires us to recognize the responsibilities we have as followers of Christ in the modern world.

If we’re going to apply the Old Testament effectively today, we must always ask ourselves questions like these: How does the original meaning of an Old Testament passage apply to our world? How does it address the kinds of people we are and the situations we face? What are our weaknesses and strengths? These kinds of questions are crucial to the process of applying the Old Testament today.

With the challenges of application in mind, we should turn to a second, closely related issue. What are the connections that make it possible for us to take the ancient, original meaning of an Old Testament passage and apply it to our contemporary world?

CONNECTIONS

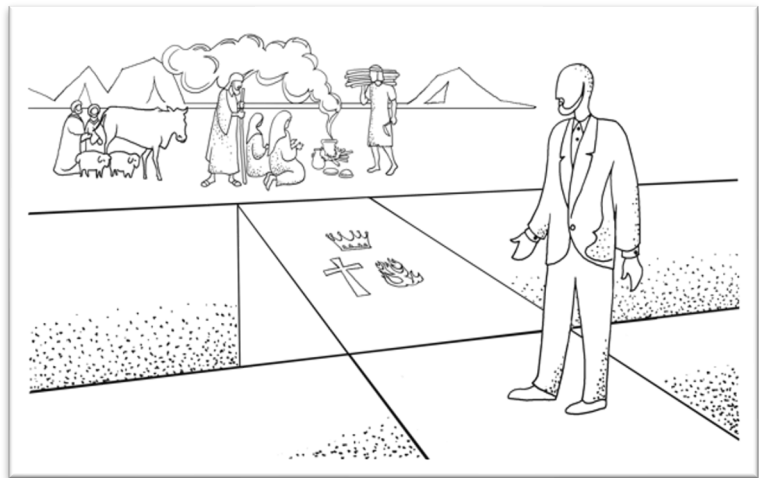
In many ways, modern application of the Old Testament is like picking up an artifact from the ancient world, and carrying it over thousands of years and then unpacking its relevance for our world today. When you think about it, it’s quite a journey. What makes us think that this is possible? How can we succeed? Well, for any ancient book to impact a modern person, there needs to be some measure of connection between the content of that book and its reader. If there were absolutely no connections, we wouldn’t understand

it at all, and we'd simply discard it. And this is true when we deal with the Old Testament as well. We must always be mindful of the connections or the commonalities that span the distance between Old Testament times and our day.

There are many ways to catalogue these connections, but it's helpful to highlight three commonalities. We have the same God as the ancient Israelites who first received these Scriptures; we live in the same world as they did; and we're the same kind of people. Let's unpack these lines of connection, starting with the fact that the God of New Testament Christians is the same God we encounter in the Old Testament.

Same God

As we've seen, there's a large gap between our modern world and that of the Old Testament. But, in a very real way, there are essential truths that have stayed the same — who we are, the world we live in, and the God we serve. Faithful Christians today worship and serve the same God that faithful ancient Israelites served in the Old Testament. This fact establishes very important connections because the Scriptures teach that God is immutable or unchangeable. He is the same God today as he was in ancient times. Now, we have to be careful here. Immutability doesn't mean that God is *immobile*. It doesn't mean that he is disengaged from history.



The fact that God is the same God bridges the gap between us and the Old Testament.

Eternal Counsel. Traditional Christian theologians have rightly taught that there are three main ways in which God is the same immutable God. He does not change in his eternal counsel, in his divine attributes, and in his covenant promises. Let's look at each of these ways and how they ensure that God is the same now as he was in the days of the Old Testament. First, God's eternal counsel — his eternal plan for the universe — is unchanging.

Whenever something happens in the world, people wonder, is this something that God really had in mind or not? And particularly when things go wrong in the world we wonder, where is God in this, and what is his purpose? And I think it's helpful for us to understand the fullness of the biblical doctrine of the sovereignty of God because it's clear that there's nothing that happens that is outside the ultimate will and purpose of God. And there are lots of places we could point to in Scripture. Ephesians 1 is certainly one of those places, which, it says

that God works out everything according to the purpose of his will. And so, everything that's ever happened in history is ultimately part of the purposes of God... And God has — and this is a great mystery for us with our limited minds — God has a purpose that he's working out through human history.

— Dr. Philip Ryken

As the prophet Isaiah put it in Isaiah 46:10:

[God is] declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, “My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose” (Isaiah 46:10).

As this passage shows, the Bible teaches that everything God has done and everything that God is doing is part of an unchanging, comprehensive design, established before his work of creation.

In these lessons, we'll explore the goal and direction of this eternal plan in some detail, especially God's plan to bring his kingdom to earth as it is in heaven. But at this point, it will suffice to say that the immutability of God's eternal plan teaches us that his Old Testament purposes align with his New Testament purposes. No matter what differences we see, the two testaments do not represent two different plans. Neither plan replaces or contradicts the other. On the contrary, the Old Testament and New Testament are phases or steps of one unified plan that has and always will move history toward one unchanging goal — the goal of turning the earth into the kingdom of God.

Divine Attributes. In the second place, God is also the same God in his divine attributes — the qualities of his essence.

To be sure, as God engages history he manifests different aspects of his character at different times. For instance, sometimes he displays his mercy; sometimes he displays his wrath. Sometimes he shows his great power; sometimes he restrains himself. But his eternal nature never changes. Listen to the way the author of Hebrews spoke of Christ's eternal nature in Hebrews 1:10-12:

You, Lord, laid the foundation of the earth in the beginning, and the heavens are the work of your hands; they will perish, but you remain; they will all wear out like a garment, like a robe you will roll them up, like a garment they will be changed. But you are the same, and your years will have no end (Hebrews 1:10-12).

And in James 1:17 we read this:

Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change (James 1:17).

As James said here, our God does not change.

Unfortunately, many well-meaning Christians often speak as if God had one set of attributes in the Old Testament and now has a very different set of attributes in the New Testament. I can remember as a six-year-old hearing my teacher comment on Joshua's battle at Jericho. When she had finished telling us the story, she looked at us all and said, "Boys and girls, God was very mean in the Old Testament. He even wanted children to die back then. But God has changed now. In the New Testament he loves everyone. Aren't you glad you live in the New Testament times rather than in the Old Testament?" And of course, we were all very glad. None of us wanted to die like the children of Jericho.

Now, as well-meaning as my teacher had been, she had a very serious misunderstanding. God's attributes *did not change* between the Old and New Testaments. On the contrary, he is the God of judgment in the Old Testament and in the New Testament. And he is the God of love in the Old Testament and in the New Testament. God's attributes are eternal. They have always been and always will be unchanging.

The immutability of God's attributes reveals connections we should expect for all periods of history. God's attributes have not changed a bit. So, we can be confident that his actions and revelations in Old Testament times, in New Testament times, and in our own day, consistently reflect his eternal nature. He is, and always has been, the same God we worship today.

Covenant Promises. In the third place, God is also the same God in his covenant promises. Without fail, God will fulfill everything he has sworn to do in covenant with his people.

Now, we need to be careful here. Many times in Scripture, God threatens and offers things to people which he does not fulfill. But threats and offers are not covenant promises. Covenant promises are those things God has sworn to do, and these covenant oaths are unfulfilling. As Hebrews 6:17 reads:

When God desired to show more convincingly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it with an oath (Hebrews 6:17).

This is why God's covenants play such an important role in this series. The teachings of the entire Old Testament and the teachings of the New Testament hold together because God fulfills his kingdom purposes through a series of major covenants. Each covenant builds on and expands the previous covenants.

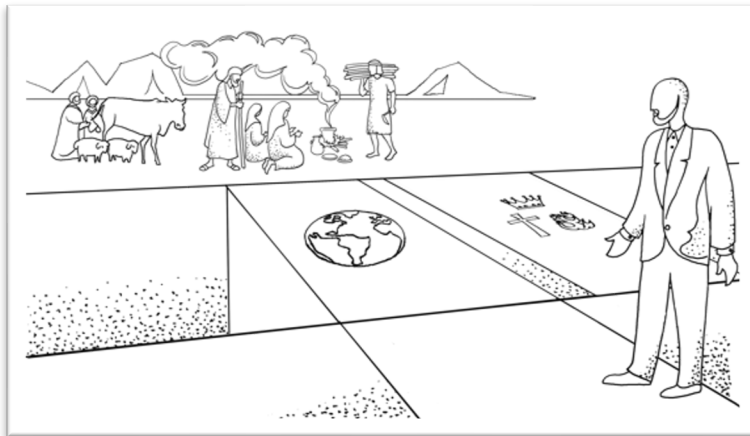
First, God made a covenant in the days of Adam, establishing the goals of God's kingdom and the role of human beings. In the days of Noah, God built on this covenant, assuring the stability of nature. In Abraham's day, God promised that Israel would increase and would spread God's blessings to the entire world. In his covenant with Moses, God set his law before the tribes of Israel. In the days of David, he established Israel as a kingdom and emphasized that David's descendant would sit on the throne and reign forever. And finally, God made the new covenant in Christ, reversing the failures of the past and fulfilling his kingdom purposes. Of course, God emphasized different kingdom policies in each of these covenants, as he saw fit in his unfathomable wisdom. But every promise he made in each of these covenants will be fulfilled because his covenant promises are immutable.

We all have to admit that from time to time it appears as if God has forgotten or set aside some of his promises. But the reality is that when we understand Scripture properly — remembering that God has not changed — we find that every covenant promise is or will be fulfilled. God may fulfill his promises in ways that no one ever expected, but he will fulfill them nonetheless. And because God is the same immutable God in the Old Testament that he is today, his covenant promises connect us to the ancient teachings of the Old Testament.

We've seen that the Old Testament and our faith today are connected by the fact that we have the same immutable God. Now, we should turn to the second type of connection between the faith of the Old Testament and today's Christian faith — the fact that we live in the same world.

Same World

As we noted earlier, it's easy for us to focus on the differences between our day and the Old Testament. But, although much has changed since the time of ancient Israel, we



The fact that we live in the same world bridges the gap between us and the Old Testament.

still live in the same world. We must never allow ourselves to think that the Old Testament was written for another universe, a world that was fundamentally different from our own. The world of the Old Testament was the same world in which you and I live today. We share a common history and a common set of circumstances with Old Testament believers.

Historical Backgrounds.

The fact that Old Testament believers lived in the same world as we do, establishes at least two kinds of connections between our New Testament faith and the faith of the Old Testament. First, the Old Testament provides historical backgrounds that explain many of our current experiences. And second, the Old Testament describes parallel situations that *mirror* many of our current experiences. Let's explore what we mean when we say that the Old Testament provides historical backgrounds to our experiences of faith.

One of the most obvious, yet remarkable features of the Old Testament is that it provides backgrounds to events and teachings in the New Testament and in our world today. Old Testament events didn't take place in a vacuum. They weren't fictitious. They happened in real history, and many of them left marks on the world that will endure for all time.

For example, the Ten Commandments given to Israel at Mount Sinai established an enduring background for the moral teaching of the New Testament. And we can even see

the impact of the Ten Commandments in monuments and ethical teachings around the world today. In a similar way, God's choice of David as the head of a permanent dynasty for God's people provided the historical explanation for Jesus' ancestry as the great son of David. And of course, as the son of David, Jesus still remains the King over all, the only one who can give us salvation. In these and countless other ways, the Old Testament provides historical backgrounds for our day.

Parallel Situations. In the second place, we know that we share the same world as Old Testament believers because, not only do we recognize historical backgrounds to our experiences, but we also see many parallel situations between the Old Testament and our day.

Like Old Testament believers, we live in a world created by God but fallen into sin. The faithful in the Old Testament faced opposition from other people and from demonic powers, and we face the same opposition today. In the Old Testament, the people depended on God's help to overcome. We depend on his help as well. These kinds of parallels are extensive. Once we look beyond the superficial dissimilarities, we can see that we live in circumstances that are very similar to those of Old Testament writers and their audiences.

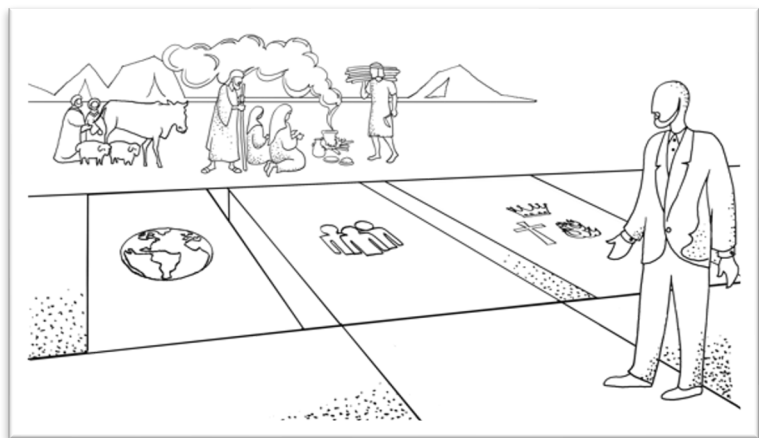
One of the most compelling features of Scripture is how it points out the parallels between one set of earlier events and later events. The prophets aligned Israel's exodus from Egypt with Israel's return from exile. The Gospels aligned the life of Jesus with Israel's exodus from Egypt. The apostle Paul pointed to the parallels between Israel marching toward the Promised Land and the lives of Christians following Christ toward the new heavens and earth. Jesus noted the parallels between Moses lifting up the serpent in the wilderness and how he himself would be lifted up on the cross. The list goes on and on. Theologians often call these parallels "biblical typology." Biblical typologies are based on the fact that later circumstances parallel earlier circumstances. And these parallels exist in large part because we still live in the same world as God's people in the Old Testament.

In addition to having the same God and the same world, we may also find connections between the Old Testament and our day because we're dealing with the same kind of people.

Same People

There are many differences between the ancient peoples of the Old Testament and modern human beings. But Scripture teaches that we are all the same kind of people. We're connected by crucial continuities that underlie our differences and unite us, even across time and culture.

Image of God. There are at least three ways in which we're



The fact that we are the same kind of people bridges the gap between us and the Old Testament.

the same kind of people as the people in the Old Testament. All human beings are the image of God; we're all sinful; and all people are in covenant with God. First, all human beings, no matter when or where they live, are the image of God. This is a clear teaching throughout the Old and New Testaments. In Genesis 1:27 we read these words:

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them (Genesis 1:27).

In Genesis 9:6 we find that even after sin corrupted humanity, human beings are still the image of God. There we read:

Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image (Genesis 9:6).

And beyond this, the New Testament also affirms that all people are the image or likeness of God. James 3:9 says this:

With [the tongue] we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God (James 3:9).

And as Paul put it in 1 Corinthians 11:7:

Man ... is the image and glory of God (1 Corinthians 11:7).

In God creating man and woman in his image, we see that that is something that we share in common with ... all of those who existed in the Old Testament, Adam and Eve of course being the first man and woman. And so that hasn't gone away, and that's a fundamental ... similarity that we have in common with all the saints that have gone before us and all the people that have gone before us.

— Rev. Timothy Mountfort

Understanding our role as God's image is crucial to understanding God's kingdom purposes throughout history. We'll have much more to say about what it means to be the image of God in a later lesson. But, at this point, it will suffice to say that a number of shared traits characterize human beings. In the past, the church has focused attention especially on the fact that human beings are rational, that we have special linguistic abilities, and that we are moral or religious creatures.

The fact that both the Old and New Testaments affirm that all people are the image of God warns us not to overestimate the differences between people of the Old Testament times and modern people. Of course, we're all different in many ways, but beneath the surface, we who live today are not entirely different from ancient people. Although we're not exactly like them, we can assume that the rational, linguistic and moral qualities that characterized their lives also characterize ours. They thought much like we think. They understood language much like we understand it. They wrestled with questions of morality and faith much like we do. And for these reasons, we can have confidence that we can

apply the Old Testament to our lives. The people who first wrote it and first received it were the image of God, just like we are.

Sinful. In the second place, we're also the same kind of people as those of the Old Testament because all human beings are sinful. Consider the words of Romans 3:12 where Paul drew from the Psalms as he described the sinful condition of people. He wrote:

All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one (Romans 3:12).

The apostle made it clear that all people have sinned. And this is not just a New Testament teaching. In 1 Kings 8:46, Solomon expressed essentially the same thing at the dedication of the temple when he said:

There is no one who does not sin (1 Kings 8:46).

In systematic theology, there is this teaching known as “total depravity.” And what that means is that in the totality of man’s being, in his thinking, feeling and behavior, it’s all been tainted with sin so that there is that basic assumption that everything he does, he does it in defiance of God’s commandments and holy standards. So yes, there is such a thing as a sinful nature.

— Dr. Luis Orteza

Because we are sinful, fallen images of God, it's not difficult for us to grasp why the Old Testament writers focused so much on sin. We connect with the Old Testament on this level because we know that we're sinners — just like the Old Testament's original recipients were and everyone since has been. We also understand why the Old Testament focuses on the *redemption* of sinners. From the time of humanity's fall into sin, all people have been in need of redemption. This fact also connects us to the ancient world of the Old Testament.

Covenant. In the third place, we're the same kind of people because during Old Testament times, in the times between then and now, and even today, all people have been bound to God by covenant.

The Old and New Testaments consistently speak of all people as bound to God by covenant. As we'll see in a later lesson, God's covenants with Adam and Noah have been called “universal” covenants because they were made with all human beings. These covenants bring all people into obligation to God as their kind and benevolent King. The rest of the Old Testament focuses primarily on special covenants that God made with the nation of Israel, often called “national” covenants. The people of Israel were bound to God by his covenants with Abraham, Moses and David, and later, by the new covenant that Israel's prophets predicted would come. And all of us are in the same condition today. Every person is bound to God by his covenants with Adam and Noah. And the church today is bound to God by his special covenants with the nation of Israel in the Old Testament and

by the new covenant in Christ. You'll recall that in Exodus 19:6, God spoke at Mount Sinai of his special covenant relationship with Israel in this way:

You shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Exodus 19:6).

In 1 Peter 2:9 the apostle Peter quoted this passage, but he applied it to the New Testament church. As he put it:

You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for [God's] own possession (1 Peter 2:9).

Here, Peter applied to the Christian church the words God spoke to his special covenant people Israel in the Old Testament. He did this because followers of Christ are now joined to God by the new covenant that is in Christ. This is an abiding line of connection that runs throughout history.

Now that we've explored the challenges we must overcome in our application of the Old Testament and examined our connections to the Old Testament, we should turn our attention to the developments that we must acknowledge if we're going to apply the Old Testament to our day.

DEVELOPMENTS

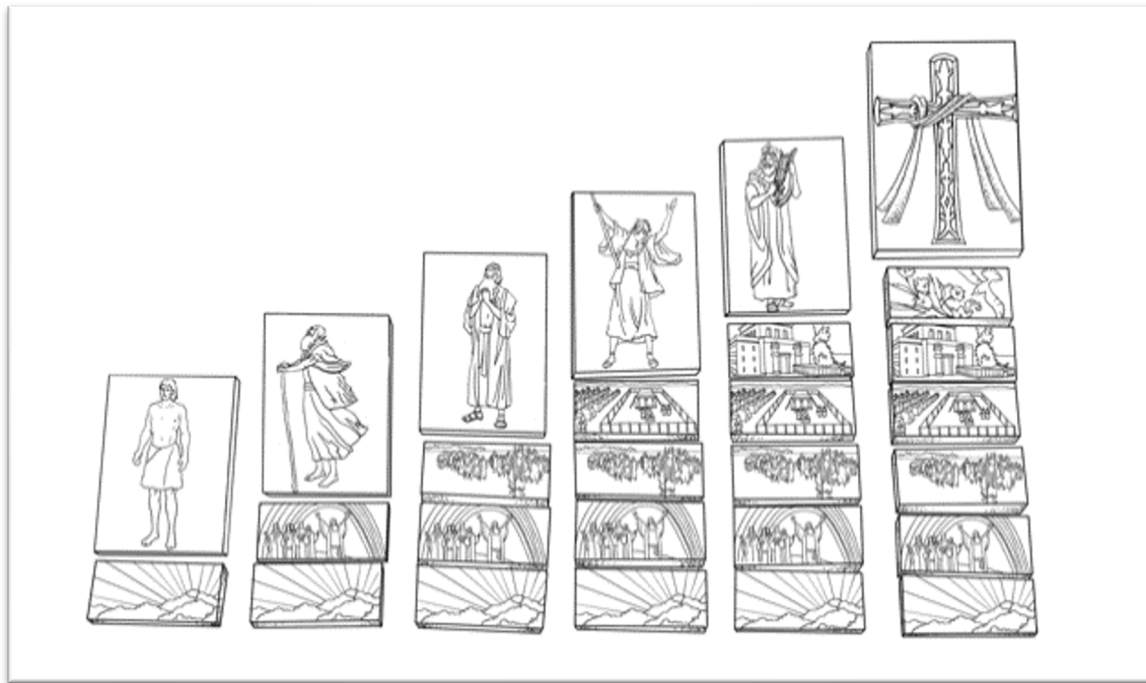
As we saw earlier, the application of the Old Testament to our lives today must account for the many historical developments that took place in biblical faith, both in the Old Testament and in the New Testament. The Old Testament, the New Testament and our Christian faith today represent one religion, one faith. Yet, we must always acknowledge that various kinds of developments took place.

There are many ways to describe these developments, but we'll highlight three major types: epochal developments, cultural developments and personal developments. In the first place, God has revealed himself and his will to his people in epochs or ages.

Epochal

Biblical history is a lengthy account of the way God disclosed himself to his people progressively as history moved toward its divinely-ordained end in Christ. There are many different ways to explore this history, but one helpful way is to divide it into major periods or epochs that correspond to God's covenants with his people. In each of these covenant periods, God revealed more of himself. Put simply, God revealed more to Noah than he did to Adam. He revealed more to Abraham than he did to Noah. Moses received more revelation than Abraham did. And God granted David more revelation than Moses. And in the New Testament age, God has revealed more than ever before.

God disclosed himself to his people progressively.



Adam Noah Abraham Moses David Christ

The writer of Hebrews stressed this point in Hebrews 1:1-2 when he wrote:

Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son (Hebrews 1:1-2).

Like biblical authors themselves, Christians have divided biblical history into different periods or epochs in different ways. But by and large, Christians have acknowledged that the greatest epochal development in biblical history took place between the Old Testament and the New Testament. This epochal division is crucial to the application of God's Word today. And for millennia, Christians have asked this question, "How do the teachings of the Old Testament apply in the New Testament age?"

Faithful Christians rightly believe that the Old Testament applies to us, but they have different ways of applying its message to our age. On one end of the spectrum are those who promote a segmented view of biblical history. These Christians especially emphasize the *differences* between the Old and New Testament eras. They assume that we should only apply to modern believers those Old Testament teachings that are explicitly reaffirmed in the New Testament. Otherwise, the Old Testament doesn't apply to followers of Christ.

On the other end of the spectrum are several extreme positions that promote a flattened view of biblical faith. These Christians stress the *continuity* of Old and New Testament periods. In this view, as long as the New Testament doesn't explicitly reject or

modify an Old Testament teaching, Christians are obligated to follow it like those who lived before Christ.

In this lesson, we'll avoid both of these extremes by emphasizing what we may call a "developmental view" of biblical faith. In this view, all of the Old Testament is to be applied to New Testament Christians. But we must also acknowledge that every dimension of the Old Testament has developed because of what God has done in Christ. All Old Testament teachings apply to Christians, but always in the light of the New Testament.

The relationship between the Old Testament and the New Testament is a question of a lot of debates. And it really is even today a question of a lot of discussion. And one way that we like to approach this development of what we call "progressive revelation" — so God didn't reveal everything at the beginning — the history of the development of the theology, of the teaching of the Old Testament in relationship to the New Testament, is really a question of partial revelation at the beginning and then a fuller revelation in the New Testament with the teaching of Jesus and the apostles in writing down the reality of the theology of the church.

— Dr. Daniel Steffen

In Galatians 3:24 Paul spoke of the relationship between Old Testament and New Testament faith in this way:

The law was our guardian until Christ came (Galatians 3:24).

In this verse, the word "guardian" translates the Greek noun *paidagogos* (παιδαγωγός). This term referred to a tutor or caretaker who would instruct, guide and discipline a child as he or she grew to maturity. So, as Paul indicated here, Old Testament teachings were like the instructions given to a child, but New Testament teachings are like the instructions given to an adult heir.

We all know that parents teach young children lessons like "Don't go in the street." "Stay away from the fire." But when children become adults, we don't warn them to stay out of the street or to stay away from fire anymore. After all, they're adults. Still, parents expect their adult children to remember the wisdom of their childhood rules. We expect adults to remember that roads and fire are dangerous and to approach them with care. For us to treat an adult like a young child is foolishness. But it's just as foolish for adults to forget what they learned from their childhood lessons.

In many ways, the Old Testament resembles rules given to a child. It was designed for the spiritual condition of the people of Old Testament Israel as they grew to maturity. The New Testament is instruction for those who live after the revelation of God in Christ. If we, as New Testament believers, obey the Old Testament as people in Old Testament times did, we deny the significance of Christ. But if we reject the wisdom taught in the Old Testament, we deny Christ's own regard for the authority of the Old Testament. As faithful followers of Christ, we are to submit to the authority of the Old Testament, but we are to do so as those upon whom the fulfillment of the ages has come.

In addition to epochal developments, if we're to apply the Old Testament in our day, we must also consider cultural developments.

Cultural

As we study the Old Testament, we must take into account the similarities and differences between the cultural patterns presented in the Old Testament and the cultural patterns of our own world. What cultural features of our day closely parallel Abraham's day? How is our culture like David's? How has human culture changed from the ancient days of the Old Testament? What customs and traditions are different? We must answer these questions if we're to make responsible applications of the Old Testament to modern life.

We live in the 21st century, and we find our culture and the one of the Old Testament, they are different. So, there is need for us to actually dig deep into the biblical culture so that we can understand the text. So, the way we do things is very different from the Old Testament. So, we really need to look at the context and the culture of the Old Testament for us to understand what God is doing in the life of his people in the Old Testament.

— Dr. Daniel Simango

Not only must we consider epochal and cultural developments, but to apply the Old Testament in our day, we must also account for personal developments.

Personal

There are both considerable similarities and considerable differences between the people of the Old Testament and people living in our contemporary world. If we hope to apply the ancient texts of the Old Testament properly, we need to ask questions like: How do our personal lives compare with those that we see in the Old Testament? What roles do we have in society? How do those roles compare to the roles of people in the Old Testament? What is our spiritual condition? How do our thoughts, actions and feelings compare to those that we see in the people of Old Testament times? By taking account of the similarities and differences between ancient Old Testament people and modern people, we can better understand how to apply the Old Testament in our day.

CONCLUSION

In this lesson, we've asked why we should study the Old Testament. We've acknowledged the difficulties we face because of the distance between us and this ancient book, including the causes of that distance and the kinds of distance we encounter. We've

also seen that the New Testament strongly affirms the Old Testament's relevance for our day, especially through the teachings of Jesus and Paul. And we've outlined the paths we must follow by considering the challenges, connections and developments associated with application of the Old Testament to our lives.

All too often, followers of Christ are satisfied to know very little about the Old Testament and only to look to the New Testament as God's Word for them. But as important as the New Testament is, it will never suffice for Christians who hope to grow in their faith. We need the Old Testament as well. It takes a lot of work to study the Old Testament, but it's worth every effort. The Old Testament is the Word of God. And as faithful disciples of Christ, we should devote ourselves to these Scriptures as Christ devoted himself to them. When we do, we'll find that the Old Testament is a wondrous gift that God has given for us to follow in every place and in every age.

CONTRIBUTORS

Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr. (Host) is Co-Founder and President of Third Millennium Ministries. He served as Professor of Old Testament at Reformed Theological Seminary for more than 20 years and was chair of the Old Testament department. An ordained minister, Dr. Pratt travels extensively to evangelize and teach. He studied at Westminster Theological Seminary, received his M.Div. from Union Theological Seminary, and earned his Th.D. in Old Testament Studies from Harvard University. Dr. Pratt is the general editor of the NIV Spirit of the Reformation Study Bible and a translator for the New Living Translation. He has also authored numerous articles and books, including *Pray with Your Eyes Open*, *Every Thought Captive*, *Designed for Dignity*, *He Gave Us Stories*, *Commentary on 1 & 2 Chronicles* and *Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*.

Rev. Michael J. Glodo is Associate Professor of Biblical Studies at Reformed Theological Seminary in Orlando, Florida.

Dr. James M. Hamilton is Associate Professor of Biblical Theology at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and Preaching Pastor of Kenwood Baptist Church.

Dr. Thaddeus J. James, Jr. is Vice President of Academic Affairs at Birmingham Theological Seminary.

Dr. Mark A. Jennings is Instructor of New Testament at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary.

Dr. Robert MacEwen is a Lecturer of Biblical Studies and Director of the Chinese Theology Department at East Asia School of Theology, Singapore.

Rev. Timothy Mountfort is Academic Dean at Western China Covenant Theological Seminary.

Dr. Matthew Newkirk is President and Professor of Old Testament at Christ Bible Seminary in Okazaki, Japan.

Dr. Luis Orteza is Adjunct Professor for Counseling at Birmingham Theological Seminary.

Dr. Philip Ryken is President of Wheaton College.

Dr. Daniel Simango is Principal at The Bible Institute of South Africa in Cape Town.

Dr. Vuyani Sindo is a lecturer at George Whitefield College in South Africa.

Dr. Daniel Steffen is Visiting Professor at Seminario Teológico Centroamericano in Guatemala City.

Dr. Peter Walker has served as Professor of Biblical Studies at Trinity School for Ministry and as Associate Vice-Principal at Wycliffe Hall, Oxford. He is currently an instructor with Jerusalem Center for Biblical Studies.

Dr. Stephen J. Wellum is Professor of Christian Theology at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

Dr. Stephen E. Witmer is Adjunct Professor of New Testament at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary and Lead Pastor of Pepperell Christian Fellowship in Pepperell, MA.

GLOSSARY

accommodation – Term used to explain how an infinite God speaks to us in finite terms by adapting his communication so that we can understand it

canon – Authoritative standard; the exclusive collection of documents in the Judeo-Christian tradition recognized as Scripture

covenant – A binding legal agreement made between two people or groups of people, or between God and a person or group of people

developmental view – View that looks at the continuity and changes between the Old and New Testaments and asserts that the whole Old Testament is relevant, but must be applied in the light of the New Testament

divine attributes – The perfections of God's essence revealed through a variety of historical manifestations; attributes that only God can possess

ergates – Greek term (transliteration) meaning “a worker” or “a laborer”

eternal counsel – God's eternal plan for the universe, established before his work of creation

flattened view – View that looks at the continuity and changes between the Old and New Testaments and asserts that if the New Testament does not mention a change, we should follow the Old Testament as closely as possible

immutable – Term meaning “unchanging”; used to express the unchanging nature of God's character and perfections

mechanical inspiration – View of inspiration that asserts that the Holy Spirit essentially dictated the Bible, and human writers passively recorded what he said

national covenant – A covenant made with an individual who represented the nation of Israel (Abraham, Moses, and David)

new covenant – The covenant of fulfillment in Christ; first mentioned in Jeremiah 31:31

organic inspiration – View of inspiration that asserts that the Holy Spirit used the personalities, experiences, outlooks, and intentions of human authors as he authoritatively and infallibly guided their writing

original meaning – The impact and meaning that God and his inspired writers jointly intended the text to communicate to its first audience

romantic inspiration – View of inspiration that asserts that the Holy Spirit inspired biblical authors to write but did not superintend their writings

segmented view – View that looks at the continuity and changes between the Old and New Testaments and asserts that if the New Testament does not mention something, we do not need to apply it

typology – The study of how significant persons, institutions and events throughout biblical history prefigure later persons, institutions and events in Scripture

universal covenant – A covenant made with an individual who represented all of mankind (Adam and Noah)