

Is the Old Testament the Word of God?

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The Old Testament (OT) was written by approximately 30 contributors over approximately 1,000 years. Its principal theme is the recovery in humanity of the image of God that Adam and Eve lost. This theme is discovered by reading the text in the context of the Great Controversy, which is revealed at every step from Genesis 3 (the fall of mankind) through the debate between God and Satan in Job 1 and 2, the description of Satan's expulsion from heaven in Isaiah 14 and Ezekiel 28, through all the prophecies of a coming Redeemer, and through each judgment on God's enemies, including those on Israel itself.

Many Christians recognize that the Old Testament provides the foundational principles and history for understanding the New Testament (NT). There are also Christians who reject the OT. This could be for a number of reasons, including 1) a misunderstanding of the God of the Old Testament, 2) a belief that it was for the Jews only, 3) failure to understand that some of the strange stories are "types" of NT events or principles, 4) horror of the judgments wrought on God's enemies, 5) shock about the revealing of immorality in many of the characters (some of them heroes), 6) disbelief in some of the miracles presented. However, a reading of the OT without bias against it can lead to the conclusion that it is the Word of God. Once that is accepted, even more wondrous truth flows from it.

Readers need to understand that the OT is full of word pictures, likenesses, and similitudes, to make heavenly principles clear in brief human language. Literal stories with local application are employed to teach spiritual lessons with cosmic application. For example, the ancient sanctuary service in the OT tells us more about the ministry of Jesus than does the NT. The picture of Hebrews in their homes with door posts covered with a lamb's blood makes clear the substitutionary death of Jesus when it says "When I see the blood I will pass over you." The Leviathan in the Book of Job tells us about how Satan afflicts God's people and how God will ultimately deal with Satan and bless His people. Joseph sold as a slave providing food for his brothers, typifies Jesus sold for the price of a slave to provide spiritual manna for the family of God. The three Hebrew boys in Daniel 3 were literally required to bow down to literal image (stated 6 times), but in Revelation 13 spiritual Israel is pressured to bow down to a figurative image (stated 6 times).

Many of the historical incidents in the OT are rich in types and symbols of how God will end the sin problem. There are various three-fold enemies in the OT that relate to the three unclean spirits like frogs in Revelation. Noah's flood tells us about the close of probation and the condition of the world at the end of time. God calling the ancient Jews out of ancient Babylon is an illustration of the second angel's message of Revelation 14 and 18. The entire story of the literal Exodus under Moses, from the deliverance from the plagues, the victory at the Red Sea, the desert experiences, and subsequent entry into the promised land, illustrate the experience of the church being led to salvation by Jesus. The many conditional promises of restoration of ancient Israel are meant to be fulfilled as certainty for spiritual Israel. The ancient Jews did not realize the promises because of their apostasy.

These arguments from logic are compelling, but the strongest reason for Christians to read and study the Old Testament lies within the New Testament. How does the NT treat the OT? What do the NT writers believe about the OT? What does Jesus, Himself, think of the OT?

The range of NT connections to the OT range from direct citations, in which the author states the source, down to mere allusions. Some NT books like Romans, Hebrews, and Revelation have high densities of OT forms of language, allusions, and quotations. [Of the 404 verses of the book of Revelation, 278 are quotes or allusions to Old Testament verses. Revelation could not be understood without the OT.] For the other books, exact numbers are difficult to count because of varying methods used.

Direct quotations are a small but easy component to count. One researcher has identified 224 such citations. Other quotes are not identified such as 1 Peter 2:24, 25, “He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls” (quoting Isaiah 53 but providing no citation). Another researcher has totaled over 4,000 quotes including allusions. This indicates that it is likely more than 10 percent of the NT text is made up of citations or direct allusions to the OT.

Throughout the NT, there is not one connection to the OT in which the NT author does not assign full authority and trust to the OT. Many times the NT author indicates that it is not merely a quotation from some other book but that God, Himself, said it. For example:

Acts 4:25 – who through the mouth of our father David, your servant, said by the Holy Spirit, “‘Why did the Gentiles rage, and the peoples plot in vain?”

Matthew 19:4-5 – He answered, “Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, ‘Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’?”

Acts 28:25-26 – they departed after Paul had made one statement: “The Holy Spirit was right in saying to your fathers through Isaiah the prophet: “‘Go to this people, and say, “You will indeed hear but never understand, and you will indeed see but never perceive.”

Given the high regard with which NT authors have used the OT, it is presumptuous for Christian readers of the NT to lightly regard the OT. Indeed, Paul said in 2 Timothy 3:16, “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.” Is this not what today’s Christian’s want? Was not Paul referring to the OT, as there was no NT at this point? Should not NT Christians search the OT for lessons for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness? But, if that argument is not compelling, we should examine what Jesus thought of the OT.

Jesus treated the entire OT as the Word of God, He referred to it as “the Scriptures.” Consider this statement about how the OT tells about Himself:

John 5:39 – search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me

What did Jesus regard as “the Scriptures”? It was the OT essentially as we know it today, except for organizational differences. Furthermore, He included both the law (Pentateuch) and the Prophets as valid Scripture. In another place he included the poetic books such as Psalms.

Matthew 5:17 – 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.

Luke 24:44-45 – Then he said to them, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.” Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures.

In Matthew 5 above, if Jesus is the fulfillment of the OT, then do we trample on our Savior when we trample on His story? In Luke 24, Jesus opened the minds of the disciples on the road to Emmaus to the OT Scriptures. Was that a waste of His time because these books were just Jewish inventions?

In John 5:45-46, “Do not think that I will accuse you to the Father. There is one who accuses you: Moses, on whom you have set your hope. For if you believed Moses, you would believe me; for he wrote of me,” Jesus blamed lack of belief in the books of Moses for the failure of the Jews to accept the Christian message. We don’t need that to happen to spiritual Israel today.

Jesus cited 12 different OT books: Genesis, Exodus, Deuteronomy, 1 Samuel, 1 Kings, Psalms, Isaiah, Daniel, Hosea, Jonah, Zechariah, Malachi. Jesus identified nine OT characters as if their stories were both real and valuable: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, David, Solomon, Queen of Sheba, Elijah, Elisha, Zechariah. He confirmed numerous Bible stories as factual. He cited the OT to respond to Satan’s temptations in the wilderness. Christians should have the same view of the OT as did Jesus. The OT is the Word of God.

Deuteronomy 4:2 – You shall not add to the word that I command you, nor take from it, that you may keep the commandments of the LORD your God that I command you.

Isaiah 40:8 – The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever.

Revelation 22:18-19 – I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book, and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book.