

The Message of the Old Testament

Session 1 A Book about God – He is One and He created everything

Introduction

The New Testament has a very positive attitude to the Old Testament.

There are so many quotations that the NT almost seems like a commentary on the OT.

- There are specific statements in the NT about the OT, e.g. Matt. 5:17-19, Luke 24: 25-27, 45-47, John 5: 39-47, 1Cor. 15: 3-4, and 2Tim. 3: 15-17, 2Peter 1: 20-21.

Sometimes the NT appears to say negative things about the OT.

- Matt. 5: 21-48 (note the repetition in vv 21-22, 27-28, 33-34, 38-39, and 43-44, “**You have heard ... but I say ...**” John 1:17, Romans 6:14-15, 7:6, 10:4-5, Gal. 2:16, 3:5, 10-14. 4:4-5, and Hebrews 8:7-13 (Hebrews is full of the theme that the old has given way to the new – note 8:13 (“obsolete, growing old, ready to disappear”).

What are we to make of Paul’s statement in 2Tim. 3:16 that, “All Scripture is inspired by God and is profitable ...” ?

What about Leviticus and Obadiah and the stories of wicked kings and prophecies of judgement on various nations in the Middle East? Much of it seems disjointed and unintelligible, concerned as it is with people living in a very alien culture long ago.

Presumably it is a fascinating study for a small group of people with antiquarian interests but how can it be profitable to my “spiritual” life? In my busy life I need to concentrate on what is relevant!

The problem

At first sight the Old Testament seems impossibly complicated – 39 separate books compiled by widely differing types of people over hundreds of years, and in almost every conceivable literary genre (narrative, poetry, wisdom literature, strange prophetic imagery, history, local and world politics, legal documents and regulations for cultic worship within a theocratic society completely different from our own).

We believe that it is God’s Word but how are we to relate to it?

- Ignore most of it and concentrate on the “relevant bits”.
- Turn everything into a “spiritual lesson” for today.
- Reinterpret Israel as the church.

In practice, how do people tend to respond?

- The abridged version: Meeting my personal needs.
- The edited version: Filtered through my personal prejudices.
- The themed version: According to my world view and priorities.
- The relevant version: Reading backwards from my place in history.
- The collage version: A jumble of pictures, promises, precepts and prophecies.

This creates problems.

- A distorted understanding of God: Constructing our own “God”, but perhaps an idol.
- A “Me-centered” view of Scripture: Setting the agenda for Scripture to fulfil.
- “Replacement theology”: Spiritualizing God’s statements about Israel.
- Loss of keys with which to interpret the NT: Losing the world view of Jesus and the apostles.

The Book of Revelation is difficult to understand. Apart from the OT it is impossible!

The solution

- A central message – Creation to New Creation.
- A developing and unfolding revelation within real history.
- Many interweaving and inter-related strands.

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A different perspective is needed.

- **God-centered**
- **The Bible is an unfolding story or drama**

A God-centered Revelation

The OT is largely a book about a small nation (Israel) in a small area of the world. Much of the content at first sight seems irrelevant to our personal lives in the 21st century in the sophisticated and technologically advanced western world.

But perhaps we miss the point. Maybe the core theme of the OT is what we need most of all – a revelation of God that will transform our view point from one that is self-centered to one that is God-centered. I discover that the primary issues are not my needs and aspirations and ambitions but rather **God – His purposes and His glory.**

When I line up with Him my life comes into order – the OT calls this “shalom”.

The OT is God’s self-revelation. It begins with the words “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” and ends in Malachi 4 with “The day of the coming of the LORD of Hosts”.

This is **the same God who is revealed in and through the Person of Jesus**, the Messiah, His Son. If we filter out the “challenging” aspects of God’s character in the OT we will probably do the same in the NT and end up with a God who is “too nice”. (See “Is your God too nice?” by R T Kendal and reflect on 1John 5:21)

There is only one God and He created everything.

The Israelites had lived for more than 400 years in Egypt, with its many gods. Following their release from slavery and their formation as a nation under God He gave them **the unique revelation that He is the only God.** It became, and still is, the central statement of their faith, Deut. 6: 4.

They actually brought some of those gods with them on their journey, Josh. 24: 14, Amos 5: 25-26, and, thereafter, were constantly seduced by the **false gods** of the surrounding nations that became rivals for their loyalty, e.g. 1Kings 11: 4-8, 2Kings 16:1-4, Jeremiah 2: 10-13.

Sometimes people imagined that they were worshipping the LORD even though they were worshipping idols, Exodus 32: 1-5, 1Kings 12: 28.

Idolatry was a major theme of the Prophets, who called them back to the worship of the one true God and warned them of impending judgement, Jer. 22: 8-9. They were, with great difficulty, finally “cured” of their idolatry, by the exile in Babylon.

The prophets, especially Isaiah mocked the whole concept of idolatry; **idols are “nothings”**, Isaiah 41: 29, Jer. 2: 4-8, 18:15.

The prophets also speak of **the majesty of God in creation**, Isaiah 40: 21-26, 42: 5, 44: 24.

The OT reveals how **He continues to care for His creation**, Psalm 104, in contrast to deism.

Ecclesiastes is a book about meaning - without God there is none.

Current relevance:

- **Humanism has become the dominant world view in Western Europe.** There are serious practical consequences if we are here simply as a result of chance.
- **Christians can be seduced by surrounding world views/values and prefer created things to the Creator Himself, in the process turning those things into idols.**
- **The absence of “God consciousness” in our contemporary society makes traditional presentation of the Gospel incomprehensible to many people.** Understanding of the reality of a Creator to whom we are responsible must precede telling the “Good News”, Acts 17: 16-34.