

Is Jesus in the Old Testament?

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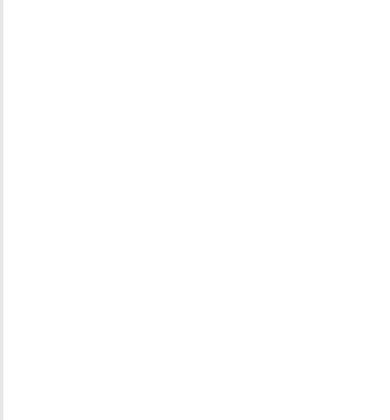
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■ Many Christians find the Old Testament to be a difficult book. It seems full of obscure rituals, ancient customs, strange laws, and a mixture of inspiring and horrifying stories. It doesn't help that many pastors infrequently preach from the Old Testament, leaving ordinary Christians on their own to try to figure it out. Indeed, some churches have gone further than that. During a recent visit to the Mennonite museum in Shipshewana, Indiana, I was struck by the prominent announcement that Mennonites are "New Testament Christians," as if that were a separate category of believers.

Certainly many Christians live their lives functionally ignoring large parts of the Old Testament, either deliberately or because they simply are not sure what to do with them. Yet the apostle Paul was talking about the Old Testament when he said,

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 competent, equipped for every good work.
(2 Tim. 3:16–17)

The Old Testament is for Christians too.

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What is more, this little booklet contends that Christ is present throughout the Old Testament. He is not merely present through a physical appearance here and there, or through the right interpretation of this or that Old Testament prophecy or type, but he is there on every page as the central theme and storyline of the entire book. Rightly interpreted, the whole Old Testament is about Jesus Christ. More specifically, the Old Testament focuses on and prepares for Christ's sufferings and the glories that will follow—that is, the gospel. As we shall see, this is the perspective that the New Testament itself teaches us to take toward the Old Testament.

However, I also want to explore what it means to rightly see Christ in the Old Testament. Not every attempt to discern the figure of Jesus in the Old Testament has been profitable. Some well-meaning interpreters have allowed their imaginations to run wild on this theme, so we need to learn how to read the story in a way that draws out what is truly there instead of inserting false connections to the gospel.

Finally, I want to look at some specific ways in which the Old Testament focuses on and prepares us to see and understand Christ and his ministry in the gospel.

WHAT IS THE CENTRAL MESSAGE OF THE OLD TESTAMENT?

Why should we expect to see Jesus in the Old Testament? The simple answer is that this is how the New Testament teaches us to read it. Recall the words of Jesus on the road to Emmaus. On that occasion Jesus caught up with two despondent disciples who were leaving Jerusalem after the crucifixion, unaware of the resurrection. As they walked in the gathering gloom of evening, he took them on a tour

of the Old Testament Scriptures, exposing their woefully inadequate knowledge and understanding by saying,

“O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?” And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself. (Luke 24:25–27)

In other words, Jesus unfolded the Old Testament, showing them how it is fulfilled in him. According to Jesus, we should expect the message of “Moses and all the prophets” (that is, the whole of the Old Testament) to be Jesus Christ. Notice too that the disciples’ response was not to be amazed at his cleverness in uncovering references to himself in such a wide range of sources. Rather, they were astonished at their own dullness in not having recognized before what these familiar books were about.

Nor was this simply Jesus’ message on one particular occasion to those particular two disciples. In that case, the connection between Christ and the Old Testament might simply be an interesting footnote or sidelight to Jesus’ main message. However, Luke 24:44–48 gives us the substance of Jesus’ teaching to all the disciples in the forty-day period between his resurrection and ascension.

“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, and said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that

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repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things.”

This is a summary of Jesus’ master class in Old Testament interpretation, given during the climactic last days of his earthly teaching ministry. Notice the comprehensiveness of the language Jesus uses: “Everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.” The Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms make up the three divisions of the Hebrew Old Testament, which Luke later designates “the Scriptures.” In other words, the focus of his teaching was not on a few “messianic” texts here and there, but rather the entire Old Testament. According to Jesus, then, the whole of the Old Testament Scriptures constitutes a message about Christ.

Yet the Scriptures are not only generally a message about Jesus. More specifically, Jesus told his disciples that the central focus of the entire Old Testament is his sufferings, his resurrection, and the proclamation of the gospel to all nations, beginning in Jerusalem. The Old Testament is therefore a book whose every page is designed to unfold for us the gospel of Jesus Christ, accomplished by his sufferings and resurrection and applied through the outpouring of the Spirit on all nations.

Jesus’ followers struggled to understand many aspects of his teaching during his earthly ministry. Yet this part of his message was clearly communicated to his disciples. Thus Peter says,

Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied about the grace that was to be yours searched and inquired carefully, inquiring what person or time the

Spirit of Christ in them was indicating when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories. (1 Peter 1:10–11)

Paul likewise declared to King Agrippa, “I stand here testifying both to small and great, saying nothing but what the prophets and Moses said would come to pass: that the Christ must suffer and that, by being the first to rise from the dead, he would proclaim light both to our people and to the Gentiles” (Acts 26:22–23).¹

According to Jesus and the apostles, then, when you interpret the Old Testament correctly, you find that its focus is not primarily stories about moral improvement, calls for social action, or visions concerning end-time events. Rather, the central message of the Old Testament is Jesus: specifically the sufferings of Christ and the glories that follow—both the glorious resurrection of Christ and the glorious inheritance that he has won for all of his people. Certainly, understanding this gospel should lead to a new morality in the lives of believers. It should motivate and empower us to seek to meet the needs of the lost and broken world around us and should engage our passion for the new heavens and the new earth that will be realized when Christ returns. But the heart of the message of the Old Testament is a witness to Christ, which centers on his suffering and glory, his death and resurrection.

What Difference Does It Make?

This focus on the gospel as the center of the whole Bible, Old and New Testament alike, has several important implications.

First, it means that the gospel (the good news about Jesus’ death and resurrection) is not merely the starting

How does the Old Testament inform our understanding of Jesus' life and teachings, death and resurrection? Christ from Beginning to End answers these questions, helping Christians better understand how to read the Bible as a story, seeing how every part of Scripture fits together to reveal the glory of Christ Jesus from Genesis to Malachi, Matthew to Revelation. "Like a puzzle," authors Trent Hunter and Stephen Wellum write, "the pieces of the Bible do fit together." Hunter and Wellum explain in their book how Jesus compares his return and the future judgment to Noah's flood in the Old Testament. Jesus said, "As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man" (Matthew 24:37). Jesus was there before the first word of scripture was written, but does He appear in scripture before Matthew? Rabbi Jonathan Bernis explains how and why Scripture's theophanies offer more than just head knowledge about ... The book of Daniel describes one of the most dramatic appearances of the Son of God in the entire Old Testament. The passage in Daniel 3 tells of three Jews, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who were sentenced to death for refusing to worship an idol that King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon erected and commanded all his subjects to revere. The king was enraged that they had questioned his supreme authority and ordered that they be thrown into a furnace and it be heated to seven times its normal intensity. Most connect Jesus with the New Testament, but was He also in the Old Testament? Was Jesus actually the God who interacted with humans in the Old Testament? The Bible shows that the One who later came to earth as Jesus Christ was the God who interacted with Israel in the Old Testament. (God the Father is mentioned in the Old Testament, but did not appear to people.) When some people read the Old Testament scriptures, they consider God to be harsh and vindictive. This view may be based on simply reading some of the well-known stories of the Old Testament. Old Testament examples used to describe God as harsh: God expelled Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden and destroyed the earth with a flood.