

## **AN EXAMINATION OF SELECTED OLD TESTAMENT PRACTICES AND ITS RELEVANCE TO THE MODERN CHURCH**

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### **Abstract**

*It has been observed that some Christians look at some parts of the Old Testament as morally offensive, primitive, and cruel such as Songs of Songs, Israel's slaughter of the Canaanites and the wide prescription of capital punishment in the Law of Moses. To others, the Old Testament is considered irrelevant to the present day Church. This paper, through a hermeneutical approach examines the relevance of the Old Testament to the present day Church and opines that failure to study the Old Testament puts confusion to the understanding of the New Testament and affects the evangelical theology. The examination of scholars' opinion shows that the Old Testament is the foundation on which the New Testament is built. Invariably, the Christian Church will be standing on a shaky foundation if the Old Testament is to be expunged from the Christian faith.*

### **Introduction**

In the earliest days of the Church, the Old Testament and its relevance to the Christian faith were subjects of controversy. This was one of the issues that caused most friction and dissension in the young churches after the death and resurrection of Jesus. Jesus himself had claimed that his own life was a fulfillment of the Old Testament. Yet many of his actions seemed to set aside its most distinctive teachings especially on the subjects such as Sabbath keeping, food laws and the comparison of his ministry to new cloth which must be used to mend old cloth and to new wine which must not be used to fill old wine skins (Matt. 5:17; Mark 2: 23-28; 7: 14-13; Matt. 5:21-48; 9:16-17). It was the protestant reformers that helped the Church to see again the importance of the historical and natural meaning of scripture, so that the Old Testament could be regarded as having value in itself. When the reformers recovered the authority of the Bible, they not only affirmed a biblical doctrine of the Church and salvation but also a biblical doctrine of Scripture. The reformers established a method of biblical interpretation in which the natural historical sense of the Old Testament has significance for Christians because of its organic relationship to Christ. The most

compelling reason for Christians to read and study the Old Testament lies in the New Testament. The New Testament witnesses the fact that Jesus of Nazareth is the one in whom and through whom all the promises of God find their fulfillment. These promises of God can only be understood from the Old Testament. Part of the New Testament writer's concern is the one redemptive history to which the Old Testament attests. The New Testament writers cannot separate the person and work of Christ or the life of the Christian community from this sacred history which has its beginnings in the Old Testament.

Anybody who reads the Bible cannot ignore the holy wars in the Old Testament. Some people have asked why a fierce holy war is presented in such a good light. God personally ordered the destruction of seven Canaanite nations, with no survivors. The question that follows is: how could innocent people be pushed aside or slaughtered? Some of these stories appear offensive to modern day readers but God is always just in his judgments and treatment of humans whom he created in his own image and likeness. Davis (1977) opines that the slaughter of the Canaanites is an error because God cannot command the killing of innocent people as the Old Testament says he did. In refutation of this assertion, *The Family Devotion Study Bible*, (1987) comments that the Canaanites were not innocent. Through their long history of sin they had forfeited their right to the land. Four hundred years before Joshua, God had told Abraham that his descendants would not occupy the land until the sin of its inhabitants had reached its full measure (Gen. 15:16). This was affirmed by Moses' statement in Deut. 9:5 "it is not because of your righteousness that you are going into possession of their land; but on account of the wickedness of these nations, the Lord your God will drive them out before you." The excesses of the Canaanites are the atrocities committed in their temples such as prostitution, orgies, human sacrifice, relics and plaques of exaggerated sex organs. God wanted the complete extermination of the Canaanites to avoid contamination of the Israelites.

### **Controversies Regarding the Old Testament**

Drane (1990) asserts that "the question of the relationship between the Old Testament and the New Testament was put in an outspoken way by a second century Christian called Marcion" (p.328). Marcion was a very influential churchman of his time, one of those who emphasized Paul's contrast of Old Testament law and the New Testament gospel to an extreme degree, so much so that he rejected the Old Testament. Jesus had spoken of the God of love who was concerned for the well being of all men and women. But as Marcion reads the Old Testament, he often saw a rather different picture of God, in which he

seemed to be associated with extreme savagery and cruelty. Far from seeking salvation of people, he sometimes seemed to be associated with their annihilation. Marcion's rejection of the Old Testament was deliberate and part and parcel of his elaborate theological system. This position clearly placed Marcion outside the rank of orthodox Christianity.

Some Christians would find it hard to reconcile some aspects of the Old Testament view of God with what they take to be the main stream Christian view of God in the New Testament. To Joyce (1983), one of the factors that contributed to the apparent controversies of the Old Testament is the sheer difficulty one encounters in the study of the Old Testament. So much seem obscure and irrelevant. One is tempted to ask: what is to be made of the detailed rituals of the sacrificial worship as the book of Leviticus reads or the long genealogy list found in some sections of the Old Testament (Gen. 5: 10-32; 11: 10-32; 36, 38). Many find this aspect hard to understand. On this note, Ugwueye (2004) asserts that we cannot understand the Lord's allusion to Moses lifting up the serpent in the wilderness in John 3:4 unless we know the story in Numbers 21: 8-9. Paul, Peter and New Testament writers quoted the Old Testament extensively.

The present day Christians asks whether the Old Testament has any relevance for a Church which had broken away from its Jewish moorings. For instance, Paul's theology asserts that the law of the Old Testament which Israel was called upon to obey as the people of God has been replaced in the gospel of Christ by the free gift of grace given to all believers. Some scholars have stressed the contrast between the law and the gospel to such an extent they have set up a dichotomy between the Old and New Testament with the old representing a religion of oppression and legalism from which the New Testament frees us.

During the protestant reformation, Martin Luther 1483-1546 and John Calvin 1509-1564 both emphasized the need to understand the Old Testament faith in its historical and social context. Luther wanted to show the value of both Testaments by seeing the Old as 'Law' and the new as 'Gospel'. This gave him a neat tool with which to separate the wheat of the pure gospel which for him was found in Paul's New Testament letters from the chaff of a superseded legalism identified with the Old Testament and Jewish Christianity. This thinking has had profound influence on biblical scholarship up to our day. But it is misguided in some fundamental way. It ignores the fact that 'law' is not the basis of the Old Testament faith nor is it entirely absent in the New Testament. In both, law is placed in the context of a covenant understanding in which God's love is the foundational principle. Luther wrongly identified Judaism with a moralistic

legalism. At this point, Luther allowed his own reaction to Roman Catholic Christianity to color his own view of the Old Testament.

Calvin recognized some of these deficiencies and instead emphasized the importance of the covenant theme in both testaments. He claims the two parts of the Bible are progressive revelation in which the ancient promises made to Israel in the Old Testament found their culmination in the ongoing life of the Christian Church. This view is not without its own problems, but at least it does try to take Old Testament faith seriously. His view is still widely held today by many conservative Christians.

After the reformation, the question of whether the Old Testament is a Christian book was effectively shelved until recent times. Some would want to give the Old Testament an equal value and authority while others argue that the Old Testament is completely replaced by the New Testament. Some try to distinguish between various parts of the Old Testament. Whatever the case may be, we need to recognize that the Old Testament is in many ways alien to modern people. The background and concerns of the Old and New Testaments are very different. The Old Testament world is completely different from the Christian's faith experience. Much of the problem can be solved once we have set the Old Testament faith in its proper historical and social context. The use of the basic tools of the Old Testament study can help a lot here. But this does not mean that we can simply set the Old Testament on one side for it contains important statements of truth about God and his relationship with people and the world that are as valid now as they ever were.

The Old Testament represents theology on its own, in the way it speaks about God, the world and mankind, addressing the issues and wrestling with problems of the Old Testament times. The New Testament cannot be used as an absolutely normative key to the Old Testament. Some moralists see some part of both the Old and New Testament as not so edifying. For example, the rigorous judgment as described in Matthew 25, the parable of the Talents whereby the servant who failed to make good use of the money entrusted to him by his master is cast into outer darkness where men weep and gnash their teeth. Paul's remarks about slaves and women are other examples. The Biblical literature inevitably took shape amidst the swirling mass of events and ideas which make up human history. The Bible at different points reflects the encounter of God with his people with varying degrees of profundity and insight. Moreover, since our cultural setting is different from the various settings in which the Bible was formed, it is not surprised that certain parts will be more difficult to understand

than others. Though, the Old Testament predates and seems harder to understand than the New Testament, both are inextricably bound together. The latter cannot be meaningfully understood without the Old Testament. The Old Testament provides firm background or foundation for the New Testament.

### **The Old Testament and Its Relevance to the Christian Faith**

It is impossible to articulate an adequate Christian faith without reference to the Old Testament. Jesus and his disciples were practicing Jews. They were thoroughly immersed in Old Testament ways of thinking about God and the world. To them, the Old Testament faith was a living and vital part of their total existence. The disciples continued to think of their new Christian experience very much in terms of the Old Testament faith with which they had been brought up.

#### **1. The temple and synagogue worship**

Jesus and all the early Christians worshipped in the Old Testament temple. Early Christian Jews in Diaspora visited the temple yearly either to pay their vow or perform sacrifices. Sacrifices were not allowed in the synagogue scattered all over the place. Though one can pray and worship there. For the Synagogue, even a Gentile could be a leader but the Temple worship was officiated only by the priests.

The New Testament records the activities of the Sanhedrin, the high priests and Levites. If the Old Testament priesthood were not important to the Christian faith, Jesus would have had nothing to do with it. Whenever Jesus cleanses a leper, he will request him to go and show himself to the priest and offer the sacrifices prescribed by Moses.

#### **2. The Scripture**

The Scripture influenced the Christian origin. The scripture being mentioned in the New Testament refers to the Old Testament. Jesus quoted the Scripture to Satan during his temptation. Similarly, at his crucifixion, Jesus found strength to face the suffering, through words from the Scripture. His cry from the cross, "why has thou forsaken me?" is a direct quotation of Psalm 22:1. Ugwueye (2004) asserts that we cannot understand the Lord's allusion to Moses lifting up the serpent in the wilderness in John 3:4 unless we know the story in Numbers 21: 8-9. Paul, Peter and other New Testament writers quoted the Scripture extensively.

#### **3. Influence of Old Testament themes and language**

Every key theological word of the New Testament is derived from some Hebrew word that has a long standing history use and development in the Old Testament. Jesus and his disciples used familiar items. This does not imply that these terms underwent no further development in the New Testament but the theological language that Jesus and his apostles used was the language available to them and their listeners. According to Mackenzie (1977), "without a background of the Old Testament and Israelites' beliefs and traditions, the message of Jesus would have been unintelligible" (p. 767). Old Testament language still permeates Christian thinking today. Drane (1990) opines that, "modern western Christians who have never seen an animal sacrifice still sing of the sacrifice of Jesus. Many of them call a part of their Church building an altar even though no blood has ever been shed there" (p. 334). We can hardly ignore the vast importance that the theme of sacrifice has come to assume in Christian worldview. The New Testament writers asserted that Jesus' life, death and resurrection that were promised by the sacrificial worship of the Old Testament had been brought to fulfillment. It was impossible to speak of what Jesus did in the lives of his people without some reference to the hopes, and aspirations of sacrificial worshipper in ancient Israel. In the aspects of worshipping God, the New Testament faith owes more than we sometimes think of the Old Testament antecedents. The style of modern Churches has grown out of the patterns of praise and joyful celebration that we have seen in the pages of the Old Testament books, especially the Psalms. More striking, is the correlation between the understandings of what worship means in both Testaments. The under guiding principle of both Testament and Christian worship is that although God is a holy God, he is also a forgiving God, and the reality of that forgiveness can be represented in the events of worship in the assembly of God's people. Thus, it was very largely the Old Testament which provided the background vocabulary of language which the authors of the New Testament used to express their insights about God's activity in Jesus. Invariably, that language influenced the way the early Christians articulated their understanding of Christianity. Hence, many Old Testament theological concepts or themes were taken and developed in the New Testament.

Nowhere is this more strikingly obvious than in the action of belief about God himself. There is the truth that there is only one God, and that he is all-powerful and yet interested in the welfare of ordinary people. God's demands on his people are primarily moral than religious services or rituals. This idea was new to ancient religions which were more interested in sacrifices and ritual than in

morality. The whole Old Testament understanding of worship makes no sense at all if this aspect is absent. Christianity emphasizes this much.

When the New Testament sets out to explain how Jesus Christ relates to the people, it does so on the basis of the Old Testament view of people and their relationship with God. It takes for granted the basic theological concepts that we have located in the creation stories, and sees human sin as a barrier between God and people that needs to be removed if fellowship must be restored. This whole structure of thought is so crucial for Christian theology that without the Old Testament insights, it is doubtful, whether the apostolic faith could have developed in the way it did.

#### **4. The concept of grace**

The concept of grace is another important concept prevalent in both Testaments. This means unmerited gift to people from God. The entire Old Testament story is given coherence by knowledge, that God had done great things for his people, on that basis; he could challenge them to loyalty and obedience. Every stage of the story shows God's active concern to work for the salvation of his people. The choice of the Jews as God's people, their liberation from Egyptian bondage was all acts of grace. The Old Testament, just as the New Testament depicts God's working in love for the good of his people. In the New Testament, the emphasis shifts from events, such as liberation from bondage to center on Jesus.

In the world of the earliest Christians, it was common place to believe that the natural, physical world in which we live in was intrinsically evil, and any sort of meaningful salvation would therefore need to involve an escape from this world to some other, more spiritual and therefore more perfect world. This was part and parcel of the Greek thought and as the Christian church moved out of Palestine into the wider Roman world, it was a temptation for them. Christians never did accept that physical existence in this world is the second best, but they were able to assert the basic goodness of life only because Old Testament conviction had informed their thinking. Consequently, instead of seeing salvation in terms of escape from this world, Christian writers in the New Testament declared that the world itself is God's plan of salvation. They were quite grounded in the Old Testament faith that had gone before them.

#### **5. The new covenant**

Many Old Testament themes are futuristic and a number of them are taken up and developed in the New Testament. The New Testament is built on the

foundation of the Old Testament. God made a covenant agreement with Abraham, Moses etc where He declared: "I will be your God and you will be my people". Repeatedly, this covenant was broken down. Jeremiah and Ezekiel predicted a new covenant to be written on the heart of the people (Jer. 31:33, Ezekiel 36:26-27, 11:19-20). At the last supper, Jesus spoke of the wine as "God's new covenant sealed with my blood." Many of the promises based on the Old Covenant are therefore fulfilled in the New Testament.

Kent (1985) opines that when Jesus mentioned the new covenant as he was instituting the bread and the cup, he clearly indicated its significance for the church. When the Old Testament is examined to discover what this New Covenant involved, and when the New Testament is investigated for further clarification, it becomes clear that only one new covenant is in view, even though different groups may derive somewhat varying benefits from it. The essence of the new covenant is spiritual regeneration, enjoyed now by Christian believers and prophesied for national Israel at the second coming of Christ. This position is summarized by Kent stating that the covenant will be fulfilled eschatologically with Israel but is participated in soteriologically by the church today. This view is also held by Whitcomb (1985) in his work on *Christ's Atonement and Animal Sacrifices in Israel*.

Kent (1985) gives six reasons for holding this position.

- i. A normal reading suggests only one New Covenant rather than two.
- ii. Hebrews is addressed to Christians and the New Covenant is viewed as relevant to them.
- iii. Hebrews 12:23-24 connects both church believers ("church of the firstborn") and Old Testament believers ("spirits of righteous men made perfect") with the same New Covenant.
- iv. The disciples would have understood Jesus' statements in the upper room to refer to Jeremiah 31.
- v. Paul connected the New Covenant with the church in the institution of the Lord's Supper and in his claim to be a New Covenant minister.
- vii. The new-old contrast in Hebrews 8 implies that the New Covenant replaces the Old Covenant (pp. 297-298).

Ware (1992) proposes somewhat different terminology to explain the relationship between Israel and the church. He views the New Testament perspective on the New Covenant as focusing on two key areas: the Cross, that is, the forgiveness it provided and the indwelling ministry of the Holy Spirit. These New Covenant



blessings are “applied in the New Testament, at least in a preliminary form, to the spiritual seed of Abraham, the church” (p.84). This provision began to be realized with Jesus’ ministry, His death for sin providing the basis of the covenant’s enactment. Not until the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, however, was the covenant actually inaugurated. With that event, the internalized ministry of the Spirit has now begun to be realized. Paul portrayed the benefits of this New Covenant ministry of the Spirit in 2 Corinthians 3 as enabling “its covenant participants to live increasingly righteous lives through the Spirit.” The Spirit’s role is fundamentally characterized in qualitatively new terms.

This suggests that “Israel and the church share theologically rich and important elements of commonality, including ‘co participation in the one new covenant’ while at the same time maintaining distinct identities.” In other words there is both continuity and relationship on the one hand, and discontinuity and distinction on the other. According to Ware (1992), “the one new covenant is fulfilled in distinguishable ways with Israel and the church” (p.93).

## **6. The Messianic hope**

As the great days of Israel became a thing of the past, the Jews began to look for the coming new age and a messiah who would restore Israel’s greatness. The special significance attached to the Davidic house colors the thoughts of the Deuteronomic editor of the books of the kings and the outlook of the chronicler in whose theological thought David played a central role. It is at the background of this royal theology too that, in the eight century prophets and later, we find the emergence of the messianic hope. If the Old Testament social relationships were to reflect the character of God himself, then it was through the king that this would be put into practical effect (Psalm 72:1-19). At least that was the theory. Though the prophets greeted each new king with optimism, their hope for the future came to be expressed in more idealistic terms that show their expectations moving way from actual kings in Jerusalem towards an ideal king—the Messiah. The Hebrew word Messiah, like its Greek equivalent Christos means anointed person. Clement (1989) says “the familiar title, Christ applied to Jesus is simply an interpretation, by means of Latinized form of the Greek Christos, of the Hebrew word, Messiah (anointed one) (p.43). In the ancient Near East, both kings and priests were anointed with oil. As the representative of God to his people, he was often referred to as God’s anointed.

The Old Testament faith is not a closed system, but a dynamic living faith that always expects God to do new things. It looks forward for a time of physical renewal for the world itself. This message is given its most comprehensive form by Isaiah concerning Babylon. He identified God's action on behalf of his people with the work of a figure he called "the servant of Yahweh." It is customary in the Old Testament studies to refer to four servant songs which describe the work of the person (Isaiah 43:18-19; 44:6). One of the distinctive features of the servant poems is that he was to be a suffering servant and the Messiah was always thought of as an all powerful conquering king. But it was this very feature of the servant's work that led the early Christians to see here an expectation that had been fulfilled.

### **7. The patriarchs**

Many Old Testament names which appear in the list of Joseph's ancestors (Matthew 1:1-17, Luke 3:23-28) helped to express the gospel writer's belief that Jesus was a true successor to those who led Israel in the earlier times. Paul, for example was proud of the fact that he belonged to the tribe of Benjamin (Rom. 11:1), the most important of these people are those who are mentioned repeatedly in the New Testament such as Adam, Noah, Jacob, Abraham, Isaac, Joseph, Moses, David, Elijah, Isaiah and Jonah. Early Christians believed that they could make their own message clearer to their hearer by referring to the Old Testament figures and relating their experiences of God in the past.

The events of the New Testament happened in the same part of the world as those recorded in the Old Testament. Palestine was at the center and background of both histories. In the minds of the Jews in the New Testament times, the background of the Old Testament experience was firmly associated with the places involved in the story of the life and ministry of Jesus. The New Testament writers made full use of these associations in presenting their message to the people of their day.

### **8. Jewish customs**

In the same vein, the customs observed by the Jewish people in New Testament times had developed over the whole period of their history from the time of Abraham to the time of Christ. The most obvious example is that of circumcision which began in the time of Abraham (Gen. 17:9-14). It is an outward sign for those who shared in God's covenant with Israel. Jesus himself was circumcised (Luke 2:21). The first Jerusalem council and Paul's letter to the Galatians were largely concerned with the issue of circumcision. Other religious customs

described in the New Testament depend for their explanation and significance on the Old Testament. It includes the appointment of priests , Matt. 8:4, the observance of the Sabbath Matt. 12:2, fast Matt. 2:16, annual feast Luke 2:41, paying of tithe Matt 23:23, and making of sacrifices. The proper place for the understanding of origin and purpose of the above customs is in the Old Testament.

It is pertinent at this point to say that the distinctiveness of the New Testament is misunderstood if it is expressed in terms of an exaggerated dichotomy or contrast between the Old and New Testament. The distinctiveness of the New Testament seems to be in the advent of Jesus as the fulfillment of the aspirations and hopes which are at the heart of the Old Testament. The New Testament writers were fully aware of their dependence on the Old Testament in trying to express God's new revelation in Jesus Christ in ways that men could understand and appreciate.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Scholars today make deliberate efforts to discover what sense the Old Testament intended to make for its own day. This paper suggests that Christians should try to acknowledge the differences between the Old Testament intention and New Testament understanding where such exists. If the New Testament is to be properly understood and appreciated, it must not be cut off from the richness of its association with the Old Testament. God has been revealing himself throughout history, and he still makes himself known to us through the whole record of his activities in Israel.

The developing worship of the Synagogue formed the pattern for the Church's own worship in modern times. Christian baptism was in some way linked with the familiar Jewish baptism of proselytes. The Lord's Supper, which is observed even more frequent, was firmly anchored in the Passover supper. Above all the Church took over, automatically and without question, the Old Testament. To many it must have been significant that the birthday of the Church fell on the Feast of Pentecost, which for the Synagogue was traditionally the Feast of the Giving of the Law on Mount Sinai. They will have remembered that Jeremiah's promise (23: 31-34) was of a new covenant with a new power, but not of a new law. For the early Church the Old Testament was simply the Scriptures.

The Old Testament no doubt has some aspect of it which apparently seems outdated and irrelevant to our contemporary church due to the work of Jesus on Calvary. Also, there is part of it which seems irreconcilable with the teachings of

the New Testament. However, for the fact that it is God's word which a good number of it got its fulfillment in the New Testament made it a do without in Christian faith. From the examination of some Old Testament practices, this paper discovers that the Old Testament is the foundation on which the New Testament is built. The Church will be of no foundation if the Old Testament is to be expunged from the Christian faith. Invariably, the Christian faith is built upon the Old Testament.

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