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Why Study The Old Testament?



by
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At least six good reasons to persevere in the daunting task of understanding the Old Testament.

People have often expressed surprise when they have found out that I am a student of the Old Testament. Some, even well-meaning Christians, are astonished because they think that it is an unusual subject matter to study. Why is that? Probably one reason is that many know very little about the Old Testament (OT); it seems obscure and too difficult to comprehend. Part of the problem is that many of our churches do not study the OT on a regular and consistent basis.

Neglecting Large Body of Truth

Ask yourself how many sermons on the OT have you heard in the last six months? How many Bible studies and Sunday school classes have dealt specifically with the OT in the last year in your church? Or more personally, when did you last study or read the OT devotionally? The reality is that many Christians are very ignorant and neglectful of the OT, the result being that they are ignoring most of the Bible since the OT makes up three-quarters

of it. But why study the OT? This is a valid and important question. First, I will present some of the reasons I have heard why people do not study the OT. Secondly, I will attempt to outline some reasons why we not only **should** but rather **must** study the OT as responsible disciples of Christ.

Reasons given for not studying the OT

- The OT has no relevance for Christians today; it is simply an historical document with laws which no longer

apply.

- The New Testament (NT) superseded the OT; the OT represents the old dispensation and therefore is no longer relevant.

- The NT is more important than the OT because it is the story of Christ and presents the heart of the gospel.

- The OT seems to present a more primitive way of life than the NT (the evolutionary theory of progressive revelation and development argument).

- The OT records many activities which are difficult for the modern person to accept or condone; the OT describes questionable and distasteful behaviour. For example, it seems to condone war and violence, patriarchal society, subjugation of women, et cetera.

- The OT is too difficult to understand and interpret, so why bother? Leave it to the theologians and scholars.

In reality, the difficulty involved in comprehending the OT text is probably the main reason why people do not even try to study it. The

other main factor is that although many Christians believe, in theory at least, that the OT is valuable and important, in practice, most treat the OT as if it is of lesser value than the NT. The NT becomes the primary focus in Christian teaching and preaching.

Although there is some validity and truth in the arguments stated above, many are somewhat problematic and give a false impression of the OT. Unfortunately, I do not have the space here to demonstrate this, except to say that these arguments do not present a complete and fair picture of the OT.

Reasons Why We Should Study the OT

1. The OT is God's Word

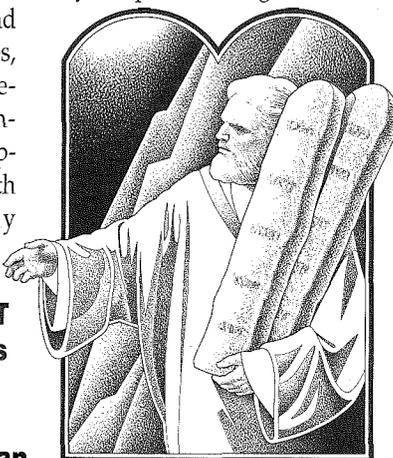
The main and fundamental reason why we must study the OT is that the OT is Holy Scripture; it is God's Word revealed to His people. The fact that the OT is divine revelation makes it essential to read and understand it. Just because we now have the NT does not mean that the OT is no longer God's Word. How can it be God's revelation to the Israelites and then suddenly cease to be God's Word? The NT itself refers to the OT as the inspired word of God (2 Timothy 3:16) and states that we must be careful to pay attention to it (2 Peter 1:19). The Bible also says that God's Word is eternal (Psalm 119:89, Isaiah 40:8). The OT remains divine revelation and Holy Scripture to the community of believers.

2. The OT was the Bible for Jesus and the early Church

Sometimes we forget that Jesus and the early Christians did not have the NT; their Bible was the OT. So whenever the NT speaks of the Scriptures it is referring to the OT text. The appearance of Jesus did not invalidate the OT as Scripture. He came to fulfill the Law (Torah) not to abolish it (Matthew 5:17-19). If the OT was Holy Scripture to Jesus and the disciples, surely it remains inspired Scripture for 20th century Christians.

3. The OT reveals God's salvation plan

Paul exhorted Timothy to continue to learn "the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" (2 Timothy 3:14-15). The OT is a record of salvation-history; the divine plan of salvation is revealed in God's dealings with His people, delivering them from slavery, oppression and exile, culminating in the Messianic hope and promise. Thus, the OT prophesies and prepares the way for the Messianic fulfillment in Jesus Christ. Jesus Himself claimed that the OT Scriptures testified about Him (John 5:39, Luke 24:44, 45). As Timothy, we too must



study and know the Scriptures in order to understand God's plan of salvation for His people.

4. The OT reveals many theological truths

The OT records the human experiences of a people who struggle in their relationship and commitment to their God. It dramatizes the victories and failures, the joys and sufferings, the trials and challenges of ordinary human beings; providing practical examples of how God deals with His people and what their responses should be. Consequently, we have much to learn from these biblical stories. In fact, Paul said "these things happened to them (the Israelites) as examples and were written down as warnings for us" (1 Corinthians 10:11). He also said they were written to teach and encourage us so that we might have hope (Romans 15:4). We must study the OT in order to learn from the past and apply these truths to our present experience.

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5. In order to understand the New Testament

Imagine if our Bible only contained the NT and not the OT? How would this affect

our understanding of the Bible? There would be many things that we would not be able to understand or explain. The fact is that the OT is foundational in trying to interpret the New. It provides the necessary background and historical context for the Messianic promise, from its beginning to its fulfillment in Jesus. The story of divine mercy and salvation does not begin in the NT; it began in the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth. Therefore, it is necessary to study the OT in order to further our understanding of the NT.

6. In order to understand human history and experience

A knowledge of the OT is also important in trying to understand the history and culture of western civilization, since the Bible has played a decisive role in shaping our society. One example is its significant influence upon literature, art and music. In fact, some English literature courses require a basic knowledge of the Bible in order to appreciate the literature. Thus, on a broader level, the OT sheds light on our human experience and what has shaped our history and society.

A practical example where a knowledge of the OT is helpful is during the singing of hymns in the church worship service. Many of the hymns that we sing cannot be fully appreciated and com-

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prehended without some knowledge of the OT. Take for example the hymn "Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah." It uses OT terms and images like pilgrim land, bread of heaven, fire and cloudy pillar and Canaan. Another example is the phrase "Here I raise mine Ebenezer" from the hymn "Come, Thou Fount" which alludes to the story in 1 Samuel 7. We need to know these OT stories in order to appreciate the meaning of hymns in our worship. Should our hymnal be thrown out simply because the Christian community has become biblically illiterate? We must get back to our Bible and get to know all of it.

Rise to The Challenge

We have examined a number of reasons why it is important for Christians to study the Old Testament and have come to the conclusion that it is very important. However, a problem still remains, namely that the Old Testament is hard to interpret and understand. Although the task may seem daunting, we need trained teachers and preachers to rise to the challenge to expound the Word of God from the Old Testament and make it meaningful to us today. ■

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