

How Christians Benefit from the Old Testament

by

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Christians honor and revere the Old Testament as inspired by God, and they learn timeless truths from it. But many of its passages, like animal sacrifice, no longer apply to today after Jesus ushered in a new era of salvation. How do we make sense of honoring the Old Testament as divinely inspired, but at the same time not being bound by all of it? What parts still apply today? When the Old and New Testaments are interpreted carefully and rightly, using Scripture to interpret Scripture, this truth will emerge: Christ has fulfilled the Old Testament in many, many areas.

2 Timothy 3:15-17, serving as a gateway for the rest of this article, is analyzed first. Then five other questions are asked and answered, such as “Do progressive revelations damage the universal truths in the Old Testament?” This article's purpose is to clarify these issues.

(1) 2 Timothy 3:15-17 says that God has inspired the Scriptures (the Old Testament), so is this holy book still binding on Christians today?

Paul writes to Timothy:

15 . . . You have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. 16 All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training for righteousness, 17 so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

This passage perfectly supports the main theme of the promise and fulfillment in the New Testament. All of the clauses are linked by that central theme: Christians learn faith and morals and timeless truths from the Old Testament, which are not bound by time and place.

Let's analyze the passage verse by verse.

15 You have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.

Abraham is an example in the Old Testament, “who makes us wise for salvation.” God promises him a son, and “Abraham believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness” (Gen. 15:6). Paul the Apostle finds this passage in Genesis “useful” for showing how faith saves us, and our faith is placed in Christ (Rom. 4). So the inspired Old Testament, when used properly, can teach us about salvation

through faith in Christ. This is a universal truth that the New Testament applies to us.

Next, Paul says:

16 All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training for righteousness . . .

Here are some examples of “rebuking, correcting, and training for righteousness.”

First, the inspired author of Hebrews uses God's “rest“ on the seventh day in Genesis 1-2 to teach us about a divine Sabbath rest that is fulfilled in Christ (Heb. 4). We rest in his atoning good work on the cross, so that we do not have to depend on our righteousness to usher us into heaven. Our own works make us insecure because we are never one hundred percent sure that they are good enough. This lesson from the Old Testament “trains“ us to receive the righteousness of Christ, for our own is not good enough. This truth rises above time and place.

Second, Jesus himself uses Scripture to rebuke some chief priests and Pharisees who reject him (Matt. 21:33-46). After telling the Parable of the Tenants, in which the tenants rent out a vineyard, but then kill the son (Son of God) of the vineyard owner (Father God), he quotes a passage from the Psalms to drive home the point as a rebuke:

42 Jesus said to them, “Have you never read in the Scriptures: ‘The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes’?” (Matt. 21:42; see Ps. 118:22-23)

The chief priests and the Pharisees (the builders) reject Jesus (the stone-turned-capstone by the Lord's doing), so they “knew he was talking about them” (Matt. 21:45). Jesus rebukes them with Scripture, just as 2 Tim. 3:16 says. The timeless spiritual message: We would all do well not to reject the stone (the Son of God) that the Lord has made the capstone. “

Our final example of “teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training for righteousness” is found in 2 Cor. 6:14-7:1. Paul quotes Scripture to preserve the holiness of believers, so that they do not mingle excessively closely with darkness and unbelievers. “I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people. Therefore come out from them and be separate, says the Lord” (6:17; cf. Lev. 26:12; Jer. 32:38; Ez. 37:27; Is. 52:11).

These passages correct the Corinthian Christians (and us). The passages train them to be more righteous, which teaches us about faith and morals, which are always valid.

Finally, Paul writes:

17 . . . so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

The main thesis of this verse, seen in the two words “so that, ” is for the man of God to be equipped for every good work. The examples used in our analysis of verses 16 and 17 show us this kind of equipping. The man of God not only teaches timeless faith and morals in the Old Testament to the church, but he himself walks in righteousness, after being corrected and rebuked by Scripture, if he was tempted to wander off.

Thus, we find that the central theme of 2 Tim. 3:15-17 counsels us to learn faith and morals and universal truths about life for followers of Christ. All of these truths come directly from the Old Testament. This book is inspired by God as a promise or prophecy, which finds fulfillment in the New Testament, especially in Christ.

When the Old Testament teaches spiritual and universal truths like how to obey God and have a relationship with him, then it is authoritative for the believer. But other areas like circumcision and animal sacrifice are no longer binding. But even in the case of circumcision Paul uses the practice to teach us about circumcision of the heart (Rom. 2:28-29), once again taking an old physical truth from the Old Testament and spiritualizing it. Our hearts are “circumcised” so that we can join the New Covenant. As eating or not eating food “does not bring us near to God” (1 Cor. 8:8), so “circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing” (1 Cor. 7:19; cf. Acts 16:3). These natural and physical things ultimately point to spiritual things, in Christ.

The larger themes introduced in 2 Tim. 3:15-17 can be clarified with five more questions and answers.

(2) What is the relation between the Old Testament and the New Testament?

A wise adage says: the New Testament is in the Old concealed, and the Old is in the New revealed. Another one says that the Old Testament is to the New what promise is to fulfillment.

Both of these sayings mean that Old Testament truths find their amplification and explanation and fullness in the New Testament. For example, the animal sacrifices in the Old points toward Christ's atoning sacrifice on the cross. Or the prophecy about the suffering and death of the Anointed Servant in Is. 53 points to Christ and his suffering and death. The New Testament makes ample use of the Old in the double theme of prophecy and promise.

(3) What are some major doctrines and themes that are promised and prophesied in the Old Testament and fulfilled in the New Testament?

Here are four areas (A, B, C, D) in the Old Testament, representing others, that have been fulfilled in the New Testament, through Christ.

(A) The Church—as an institution—no longer wages military warfare as the Old Testament commands. That was relevant to the historical era of the Old Testament. God wanted a small land cleansed of a specific kind of paganism. But in the New Covenant believers wage spiritual warfare to fight nonmaterial evil beings and ideas by preaching and praying alone. The inspired Apostle Paul says:

3 For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. 4 The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. 5 We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ. (2 Cor. 10:3-5)

Paul uses the image of a military war with words like *weapons*, *fight*, *demolish*, and *strongholds*. But these verses have nothing to do with fighting people with sharp swords in a physical war. Instead, the verses communicate mental and spiritual warfare, in key words such as *arguments*, *pretension*, *knowledge*, and *thought*.

(B) In the Torah, the three main traditional divisions are fulfilled (the ceremonial or ritual, judicial, and moral), but only the first two are analyzed here.

First, Jesus fulfills the ceremonial or ritual aspect of the Torah. Hebrews 9:11-14 says:

11 When Christ came as high priest of the good things that are already here, he went through the greater and more perfect tabernacle that is not manmade, that is to say, not part of this creation. 12 He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves, but he entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, having obtained eternal redemption. 13 The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of heifers sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean. 14 How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse out consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we serve the living God.

This passage contrasts the sacrificial system in the Old Covenant under a fallible high priest, a temporary tabernacle and the blood of animals with the Christ's once and for all sacrifice, which ushered in the New Covenant as he entered the perfect, heavenly tabernacle. The Old Testament makes promises by using temporary signs and copies, whereas the New fulfills them with their reality.

Besides the atonement through blood sacrifices, Christians are permitted to eat whatever foods their conscience allows them (Mark 7:14-19). If they voluntarily keep away from traditionally unclean animals like swine, then they are free to do this. But this is not a requirement from Christ or the New Testament authors. In Christ, all foods are ritually clean (1 Cor. 8:1-13) (See Question no. 1, verse 17).

Second, Jesus fulfills the judicial aspect of the Torah.

The passage from the Epistle to Hebrews just now quoted above discusses the outward cleansing. In the New Covenant, Christ cleanses the inner man. His death on the cross takes away the severe penalty of death for sins like homosexuality and cursing parents because divine wrath for human sins was poured on him on the cross. However, criminals like murderers should be punished, because of the principles of justice behind the particular rules. Both the Old and New Testaments promote good government (Rom. 13:1-7). Jesus and the New Testament authors never rescinded justice. But even criminals can have their sins forgiven while they suffer the just consequences of their crimes. The lives of criminals can be redeemed.

Here is a link to a ministry, [Prison Fellowship](http://www.pfm.org/default_pf_org.asp). They preach the gospel to prisoners and help them out in practical ways. http://www.pfm.org/default_pf_org.asp

(C) In the Old Covenant, God gave instructions on how to build a mobile tabernacle (Ex. 25-27). Then he gave special permission to Solomon to build a permanent temple (1 Kings 5:1-6:38 and 7:13-8:66). However, Jesus fulfills this earthly temple in his own person and in his church. Jesus says to the Pharisees, referring to himself: "I tell you that one greater than the temple is here" (Matt. 12:6). Jesus said this in the historical and literary context of keeping the law and sacrificing in the temple. He now fulfills the temple sacrifices and becomes a living temple through his new people of God: his church (1 Cor. 3:16 and 1 Pe. 2:4-8). His church is found around the world now, so his living temple is worldwide and not limited to one location. Further, the long passage in Hebrews (see B, above) says that Christ entered a perfect tabernacle, that is, in heaven. So the earthly tabernacle in the Old Covenant has multiple fulfillments: Christ's person, his church, and heaven. These fulfillments are united in their move away from the literal and obsolete earthly tabernacle under the Old Covenant.

(D) Christ fulfills prophecies that predicted his first coming. This theme relates to a major part of the Old Testament, the Prophets. They promised a new era of salvation, and Jesus fulfills that promise. As noted under Question no. 2, the primary example among many, many others is found in Is. 53, which describes the suffering Servant-Messiah. Verse 5 says: "But he was pierced for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed." This is a perfect description of Jesus' death on the cross, since he was wounded and pierced. His death brings us peace from God and with God because it atones or pays for our sins. He fulfills prophecy that predicted his first coming, and he is in the process of fulfilling many other prophecies.

(4) Is there a progression of revelation from the Old Testament to the New Testament?

Progressive revelation is a fact of the Bible.

In Paul's Epistle to the Galatians he divides the dealings of God before Christ came and after he came. In the past, people were enslaved to basic principles of the world. "But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under the law that we might receive the full rights of sons" (4:4-5).

Next, the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews makes this point very strongly, distinguishing between past revelations and those in the last days. "In the past, God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things and through whom he made the universe" (Heb. 1:1-2). In ancient times, God used a variety of means of revelations, even Balaam's donkey (Nu. 22:21-34). Now revelation has progressed up to the Son of God. The New Testament is the final and complete revelation.

The Epistle to the Hebrews goes on to say that the Old Testament is rooted in history, being encased in earthly and cultural shells, containing many types and shadows and symbols (e.g. Heb. 8:5 and 9:23). The New Testament, also rooted in history, contains the reality, substance, and fulfillment. It is a more complete sacred book with mature themes, such as the fullness of the Spirit of God. In the Old Testament, the Spirit was given to a limited number of people and not in his complete power. But in the New Testament, the Spirit is poured out on the universal church, and he dwells in them in a permanent and powerful and full way.

However, the incompleteness of the Old Testament does not mean that it is devoid of some mature teachings. An example is polygamy and monogamy. The Old Testament holds up monogamy in the Garden of Eden, but it also allows polygamy, though it is also honest enough to reveal the problems inhering in this ancient custom (Gen. 16:5 and 1 Sam. 1:6-7). The New Testament affirms the original model in the Garden of Eden: one man and one woman (Matt. 19:3-6). So monogamy represents a mature teaching of the Old Testament, which the New Testament everywhere affirms.

(5) Do progressive revelations diminish or cancel the divine, universal truths in the Old Testament?

Nothing damages divine universal truths. Revelation is given to humans in a form that they can understand in their own culture and language and customs. It is misguided to force, for example, the culture of Corinth in Paul's day on to the culture of Sinai in Moses' day. Interpreters of the Bible take each passage in its historical context. But embedded in these various contexts are truths that transcend

or rise above time and place. For example, Moses says not to commit adultery (Ex. 20:14), and Jesus says the same (Matt. 5:27-28).

Next, here is a cultural-historical example from which we can derive timeless truths even today. Moses sent twelve spies to explore the land of Canaan (Num. 13). After their return, ten gave a bad report. No one could conquer that land. But only Joshua and Caleb had enough faith to proclaim that the land is fruitful, and God would give it to them, so they should prepare to take it. But should we apply the passage literally today as if Christians go out and spy and conquer? Rather, the universal truth that we learn is faith and trust in God, which raises our vision beyond our physical surroundings and challenges and obstacles; keeping our eyes focused on them may cause us to doubt. God will help us conquer our own non-literal "land of Canaan" if we put our trust in him and follow him closely.

However, this search for timeless truths does not mean that we discard the historical context of each passage in the Bible. Referencing this context keeps us honest and does not allow us to twist the Scriptures as we want. It is a difficult process to get to know the cultural and social and political context of the Bible, which has been written over a span of fourteen hundred years. So it is imperative to find accessible, understandable commentaries that respect the Bible. Often, Bible translations have commentaries added in, such as the New International Version (NIV) Study Bible. I find it to be very helpful.

So the concept of revelations that progress from one era to the next does not damage universal, timeless truths, such as faith, obedience, redemption, salvation, trust, praise and worship, and fellowship with the Lord. These themes run throughout both the Old and New Testaments, regardless of the era. However, the New Testament puts its own stamp on them, such as salvation through Christ and his atoning death of redemption, to which the Old Testament had testified, if only partially and indirectly through animal sacrifices and prophecies concerning the Messiah.

(6) How do we know when the Old Testament applies to Christians who live under the New Covenant and when it does not apply?

As noted in the previous question, the New Testament guides us as to when to apply or not apply the Old Testament, and this interpretive skill requires careful study. The New Testament sacred books and epistles quote the Old Testament, but their use of it teaches lessons about faith and morals and other timeless themes. Even when a New Testament saint, like Stephen, reviews an historical outline of the Old Testament, the spiritual, moral punch line is not far away (Acts 7:1-8:1). Stephen sketches out the sweep of the Old Testament to rebuke the self-righteous leaders (recall that rebuking is a purpose in 2 Tim. 3:16). The spiritual punch line says that the Jewish establishment in his day was too eager to kill their own fathers and the Righteous One, Jesus Christ (Acts 7:51-52).

But we must not do a simplistic transference of every verse in the Old Testament to our lives, the church, and society today. This has caused all sorts of problems. This

example must be repeated. God commands in the Old Testament the execution of adulterers (Lev. 20:10). However, Paul points out that some in the church were once adulterers (and he adds homosexuals, prostitutes, and idolaters, all of whom were stoned in the Old Testament). But now they have the opportunity of being cleansed: “And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God” (1 Cor. 6:11).

It must not be believed that early Christians really wanted to stone sinners, but they could not because Roman or Jewish law prevented them. Smaller communities within the dominant one could carry out their own brand of justice before the authorities knew about it. Jesus was nearly thrown off a cliff by a mob (Luke 4:28-30) and almost stoned by other mobs (John 8:59 and 10:31). Stephen was stoned to death. Jews and Gentiles of Iconium plotted to stone Paul, but he fled their city (Acts 14:5). He was nearly killed by this gruesome method in Lystra (Acts 14:19). Finally, a Roman named Gallio, proconsul of Achaia, Greece, who lived in Corinth, showed no concern when some Jews beat Sosthenes the synagogue ruler for supporting Paul. In fact, Gallio told the Jews “settle the matter yourselves” (Acts 18:15). “Then they all turned on Sosthenes the synagogue ruler and beat him in front of the court. But Gallio showed no concern whatsoever” (v. 17). His lack of concern may indicate the special exemptions that the Jewish community enjoyed in the Roman Empire. Still, though, a small community within the large one could take matters into its own hands before the authorities knew about it, and sometimes they explicitly permitted the sub-community to do this.

To return to our example of how the early Christian church dealt with sinners who would have been stoned under the Old Covenant, the New Covenant ushers in a new way to deal with them. They convert to Christ and are saved and washed and sanctified. But if they do not want this, then that is their free choice. Even in this sad case, Christians wage spiritual warfare by preaching and praying alone. They do not (or should not) threaten or kill sinners by stoning them (or by any other method). Jesus Christ pays for this harsh penalty meted out in the Old Covenant by his death on the cross.

Conclusion

Christians receive great benefit and edification from reading the Old Testament. This sacred book reveals many timeless and universal themes, like faith and salvation, and hope and praise to God. But this book has also been fulfilled in Christ, as God had promised. Now the New Covenant guides the believer in Christ (and the rest of society if it wants). He reads the Old Testament through the eyes of Christ and the New Testament books and epistles. He must never simplistically transfer every verse from the Old Covenant (like executing mediums and adulterers) to the New Covenant, which instead provides forgiveness and reconciliation and restoration, if they want this.

These words must mean something: Old Covenant and New Covenant; Old Testament and New Testament. Nonetheless, the interrelation between the Old and the New is rich and profound. It takes years of study to see how the two merge and separate, only to merge and separate all over again—the unity and diversity of the Bible over for a span of fourteen hundred years. The Old is to the New what promise is to fulfillment. The New is in the Old concealed; and the Old is in the New revealed.

The key is to know both the Old and New Testaments thoroughly.

Here is the universal truth that emerges from and unifies both Covenants throughout the fourteen hundred years that the Bible was composed: God loves us and offers a relationship with him. Now the fullest relationship comes through Christ and the Spirit.

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This article has a companion piece: "How Jesus Christ Fulfills the Old Testament: An Exegesis of Matthew 5:17-19"