



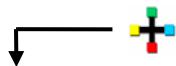
Why Study the Old Testament?

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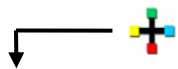
### **The same God is active now as then**

Perhaps the simplest answer to the question which will occur is that Jesus Himself studied the Old Testament, and we shall not understand Him unless we understand it. The more we study His words the more we see how His mind was saturated with the thoughts and words of the Old Testament, and how at every critical point he draws upon it as the source both of thought and of the language in which His thought is expressed. Truly we cannot understand Jesus if we do not understand the Old Testament.

### **What the Bible Is?**

But we must go further and examine the ideas that lie behind this question. If we do so we shall find that behind it there lies a wrong idea of what the Bible is and why we study it. I mean, the idea that the Bible is a collection of teachings and stories which explain and illustrate eternal truths about God and man, the nature of human life, and the way it ought to be lived; a collection, of biographies of men and women from which we can draw valuable moral lessons. Of course the Bible does contain these things, and it is not wrong to make this use of its material as occasion arises. But it is totally wrong to think that this is what the Bible essentially is. If this is what the Bible is, then we can certainly afford to do without the Old Testament. Any good teacher could produce a much more useful collection, and he could certainly leave out all the stories of cruelty and lust, all the tedious description of the Temple and its furniture, and all the other material which has no evident value as a source of moral instruction. Indeed one must say that if this is what the Bible was meant to be, the Editors of the Readers' Digest would have made a much better job of it! And, in any case, those who have really grasped the underlying truths do not need these illustrations. Illustrations are necessary for teaching the young and the illiterate, but adult and educated minds can grasp the essential facts (e.g., the love of God, the brotherhood of man, the importance of honesty, truthfulness, chastity etc.) without the help of the illustrations.

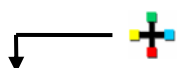
The fact is, however, that the Bible is not a series of illustrations of general truths which we can grasp even without the illustrations; it is the record of God's saving acts for the redemption of the



world. These acts are themselves the substance of what it has to say; they are not illustrations of something else. When the great Christian thinker Pascal died, there was found in his clothes a paper with these words: 'Not the God of the philosophers, not the God of the wise men, but the God of Abraham, of Isaac and of Jacob'. You see what he meant? The One in whom he put his trust was not the dim figure who comes at the end of a long chain of argument; He was the God who has done mighty deeds here in history, in the lives of men, for their salvation. It is these mighty deeds that the Bible records, and that is why we read it.

### Through the Jews

Now that statement raises a lot of difficult questions. I cannot deal with all of them, but I shall try to deal with the more obvious ones. The first is this: 'The Bible may be the story of God's mighty deeds; but do you mean to assert that it is the only place where His deeds are recorded? Has He done nothing else in the world except the things described in the Bible? After all, the Bible is almost entirely concerned with the affairs of the Jews, who are only one among the many races of men. You surely do not believe that God is only interested in the Jews?' We had better face this question at the outset, for it is fundamental. It concerns what theologians call the doctrine of election. Throughout the Bible we find it repeatedly stated that God has chosen certain individuals and groups, out of the general mass of their fellow-men, for some purpose of His. There is no escaping the fact of election in the Bible. And quite definitely the Bible is written by people who believe that God chose the Jews to be in a special sense His own people, to be the means of bringing His salvation to men. Jesus also believed this. In His talk with the Samaritan woman, in which He said 'The hour cometh and now is when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and truth' He also said - in the very same breath - 'Salvation is of the Jews'. A very great part of His teaching concerns just this fact - that the Jews were chosen by God to be His people, but have denied their true calling and therefore they are going to lose their inheritance. For, if the Bible teaches election, it also teaches that God's people have constantly misunderstood what it means to be God's people. God chose the Jews - according to the Bible - not for themselves but for the sake of the world. They were chosen to be His witnesses to the world. When they forgot or denied this, and behaved as though they were God's favourites, God punished them, and finally took away their position from them. God works by this method of election, of choosing one to be the



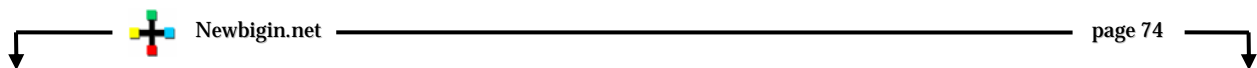
means of bringing in the next, because His purpose is not to pick out an individual here and there for His kingdom, but to re-create for Himself that one family which He purposed in the first creation. He does this, says the Bible, by starting with one man (Abraham) and one race (Abraham's descendants through Isaac and Jacob) and thus establishing - so to say - a bridgehead within the human race from which He can work. The Old Testament is written in the belief that it is through the Jews that God is working out His plan of salvation for the world.

Now, of course, the way in which we read the Old Testament will depend on whether or not we share that belief. If we do not, we shall read it as an interesting record of primitive religion and its development, or as a source from which we can extract vivid tales and moral stories and perhaps,

some very lovely prayers and some fiery sermons about social justice; we shall not treat it as vital to our religious life. But the Christian Church does not regard the Old Testament in that way. It binds it up with the New Testament and calls the whole book 'The Word of God'. What right have we to do this? One may answer that question by saying two things: (a) As I have already said, Jesus' teaching assumes that it is true that the Jews have been chosen by God as His people; His own work is directed definitely towards the Jews in order to bring before them the final challenge to accept God's calling, and He does not deal with the Gentiles except very occasionally; and He interprets His own death as the event by which the Jews forfeit their position as God's own people, and it is given to others. (b) The Old Testament itself does not make sense without the New. It leads forward into the New. It asks questions to which there is no answer if the New Testament be not the answer. It raises hopes which can only be satisfied in Jesus. Let me give - very briefly - three examples of what I mean.

### **The Meaning of Righteousness**

The whole line of teaching which runs through Moses and the great prophets leads to a clearer and clearer understanding of the fact that God is righteous, and that nothing less than righteousness will satisfy Him; that He cannot be fobbed off with ritual or sacrifice but demands individual and social righteousness. 'What does the Lord require of thee but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?' (Micah 6:8) It is astonishing how cheerfully people repeats that verse, without realizing that if God really does require these things, then we are all damned - for none of us does these things as God requires them to be done. If we imagine that we do these things, we are hypocrites; if we



know that we do not we are hopeless. And that is exactly what happened to Judaism by the time Our Lord came. The wonderful line of prophetic teaching had ended in the scribes and pharisees, and the rest of the people who had given up attempting to keep the law in all its rigour were lumped together as 'publicans and sinners'. It was into that situation that Jesus launched His astounding message that He, the promised Messiah, had come not to call the righteous but the sinner. And yet, as Paul showed later, that was precisely not the abolition of the law but its true fulfilment.

### **Fulfilment of Worship**

There is a parallel line which we do not study so much, by which we can trace the development of worship through the Old Testament. It begins with the simple and cheerful worship in which the fellowship between the people and their God was strongly felt and expressed. But as the sense of God's holiness and righteousness deepened, so the sense of distance between man and God increased. There was more emphasis upon the sin offering. Worship became more and more fenced off from the common people. Finally there is the situation in which the Holy of Holies is completely screened off from the people, and there is access to it only once a year, and that for the High Priest alone. And the sins for which he can make atonement are only minor and accidental sins. He cannot make atonement for 'sins done with a high hand'. Into this situation comes Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the whole world, by whom the ungodly are brought to God and the unclean made holy. The full meaning of this as the fulfilment and the end of Jewish worship is expounded in the epistle to the Hebrews.

### **God in His Kingdom**

Finally there is the whole problem of *kingship*. The rule in the world is expressed through some sort of government. After the anarchy of the period of the Judges, the Jews naturally wanted a king. The Old Testament records two accounts of the first king, one of which treats it as something which God provided, and the other of which treats it as rebellion against God. That ambiguity belongs to all political power. For a brief period Israel had a good and glorious King, and the memory of David's kingship haunted her until Jesus came. But David was followed by Solomon, in whom the kingship was outwardly glorious yet inwardly already decaying. In the next reign the kingdom split, and before many generations had passed both branches of it had been destroyed. The Jews, crushed by pagan empires, longed and prayed and

waited for a true King, one in whom the Kingship of God would be truly embodied. Into that situation Jesus launched His cry: 'The Kingdom of Heaven is at hand'. But when they tried to make Him king, he evaded them. When Peter tried to fight for His kingship, Jesus rebuked him. Before Pilate He confessed that He was a king, but added that His kingdom was not of this world. He was crucified with His crime written over His head: 'The King of the Jews'. With Him the Kingship of God appeared on earth, and from the day of Pentecost is proclaimed among all nations. No New Testament writer has worked out the relation of His Kingdom to the kingdoms of this world as thoroughly as St Paul has done for the Law, or the writer to the Hebrews has done for worship, but it has been one of the great themes of subsequent Church history.

### **One Book**

This last section has perhaps been a little difficult to follow. Let me then, express its main point by saying very simply that we cannot understand the New Testament without the Old and we cannot understand the Old Testament without the New. Therefore the Church treats them as one book. And the central theme of that book is God's choosing (election) of a people to be His own people, by whom He purposes; to save the world. Now (and this is the next great point) we who read it in Church today, read it as the members of that people. It is therefore our own history that we are reading. We are reading the story from the inside, so to speak. So we want to know what actually happened. There may be parts of the story which are dull, and parts which are unpleasant and even offensive, but we want to know what actually happened and how we came to be where we are. Of course it is natural that we should like some parts more than others, and that we should use some parts for teaching and edification and not use others. But we want the whole record, and those who are responsible for teaching and preaching in the Church must be constantly studying the whole record, so that they and we may understand what God has done for the salvation of the world.

When we stand up in the streets and preach the Gospel and ask people to join us in the Church, we are making the tremendously bold claim that God really has a purpose for the world and for all men, and that we have the secret of that purpose, and that all men should join with us in obeying and fulfilling that purpose. When our hearers ask us to explain why we believe this, we ask them to read the Bible. There they will find a sort of outline of world history, beginning with the creation and ending with the glory of

God's perfect kingdom; but the central thread of the history is the story of God's people. And the centre point of the story is the birth, life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus and the

coming of His Spirit to His disciples. It is from that centre point that we understand the whole Bible, both the Old Testament and the New. Everything in the Bible points towards Him, and then points outward from Him to the end of the world and the ends of the earth. I have tried to illustrate this in regard to three themes conduct, worship, and political power. Everything in the Bible is to be understood by its reference to Him; He is the turning point of the story. The purpose of everything in it is to lead us to Him. We do not understand any of it rightly if it does not lead us to Him; but equally we do not understand Him rightly except by seeing Him where He is, at the centre and turning point of actual history. That is why we need the whole Bible.

### **The Same God**

Having said all this, I am conscious of the fact that I have still left the main thing unsaid. It is this. The God whose mighty acts are recorded in the Bible is the same God whose people we are. He is the living God. When we diligently read and ponder this record which He has given us of His own saving deeds, it becomes alive to us now. Because it is the same living God who is active now as then, the same God who dealt so wondrously with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, with Joseph and Moses and Joshua, with David and Elijah and Amos; the same living God who was in Christ calling Peter and James and John to Himself, sending out Paul as His ambassador to the Roman world, and guiding the beloved disciple into all the truth - because it is this same living God who is with us today, His word in the old records becomes - as we read it - His living word to us now. We find that we are in truth part of the story, and the very words of it come to us as His words to us. Every servant of God who has faithfully wrestled with the Bible knows that that is true, of the Old Testament as of the New. And even if you forget all the rest of what I have said, I hope you will believe this testimony of all His people. For that is the real reason for studying the Old Testament - that God Himself speaks to us in it.

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