

## *Unity and Diversity in the Two Testaments*

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[p.83]

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What is the precise relationship of the New Testament to the Old? Is one of the two Testaments more important than the other? Are there parts of the Old Testament which ought to be minimized in the teachings of the Christian church? Should the Ten Commandments be recited today or at least taught as a Christian standard? Is it proper to argue that the church will not pass through the tribulation on the grounds that the church is distinct from Israel and that the tribulation will afflict Israel only? How can Paul say we died to the Law and yet go on to insist that the Law is good? Did Jesus challenge the Old Testament in Matthew 5:21-45? How should a Sunday School teacher handle the commands in the Old Testament to kill off the populations of defeated nations, or the sordid stories in the book of Judges? Does every detail of the tabernacle have to find meaning in the person and work of Christ? Were people saved by grace through faith in Old Testament times or on some other basis? Should we ignore all the instances of praising God through the use of musical instruments because they are (with the important exception of Rev. 5:5; 15:2) in the Old Testament? How is it that Jesus brought something so new that the old wine skins could not contain it (Mark 2:22), yet goes back even beyond the Pharisaic traditions to 'Moses and all the Prophets' to explain 'what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself' Luke 24:27)?

These are just some of the theological and practical questions crucial for teachers of the Bible, which grow out of the basic issue of the relationship of the two Testaments. The purpose of this brief article is not to solve all such issues, and it may be justly feared that more questions have been asked already than can possibly be answered in such short compass. The article will rather have served its purpose if it stimulates deeper inquiry into the Scriptures themselves, suggesting some guidelines for understanding, and providing a survey of some of the recent contributions to the issue. It is an issue which has occupied scholars who specialize in both the New Testament and Old

[p.84]

Testament fields, especially in the last twenty years or so. At the same time there has been much discussion about unity and diversity within each Testament. Although these questions are all interrelated, we shall concentrate on only a few major issues which concern both Testaments. To some there is no 'issue', because both Testaments can be seen to have meaning when Christ is the key. To them the matter is expressed satisfactorily in the ancient couplet: 'The New is in the Old concealed; the Old is in the New revealed.' If this was good enough for Augustine, should it not be good enough for us? But the very existence of the couplet testifies to the fact that from the church fathers on, Christians have recognized that there are two very different Testaments which need to be understood in proper relationship to each other. The approaches made to this relationship over the centuries have varied considerably from each other.

## APPROACHES TO THE ISSUE

1. One of the most famous attempts to deal with the Old Testament from a post-New Testament standpoint was made by *Marcion*, a church leader in the second century who was excommunicated as a heretic. Marcion considered Christianity to be so radically different from Judaism that even the New Testament itself needed to be edited to exclude those parts which established a close connection with the Old Testament. He denied that the creator-God of the Old Testament was the same as the God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ. Marcion's concepts were extreme, but others more recently, such as Adolf von Harnack and Rudolf Bultmann, have also minimized the place of the Old Testament.

2. Another approach was to give due honour to the Old Testament emphasizing its points of similarity with the New, but at the same time stressing the diversity. Luther is known for his strong distinction between Law and Gospel. It may be said that Luther stresses the distinctions between the Testaments more than did Calvin, who saw a strong covenantal relationship.

3. An approach which many have used in recent years to address such problems as the toleration of polygamy among Old Testament saints and the seemingly brutal warfare carried on by the people of Israel under the direction of God is that of progressive revelation. This is not a cure-all for problems of morality in the Old Testament, but it does recognize that with the passage of time God revealed more to his people and, in turn, expected more from them. Progressive revelation applies not only to enlightenment concerning moral standards, but

[p.85]

also, and more importantly, to the development of doctrines, e.g. the concept of the Servant Messiah or the significance and destiny of the 'Land'. Jesus' words, 'You have heard... but I say', is sometimes viewed as an instance of progressive revelation (though the terminology may not be used), but this by no means solves all the questions regarding Matthew 5:21-48.

4. Yet another approach is that of *dispensationalism*. This posits a difference in the way God rules his people from age to age. Each age, or dispensation, has been a test which ended in failure. Recent exponents of the system have seen less discontinuity between the Testaments than formerly. If it was earlier thought by some that Old Testament saints were saved on some principle other than faith, it is more difficult to find this position today. One of the most significant emphases of dispensationalists still remains: the distinction between Israel and the church. Readers are well aware of the influence dispensationalism has had on the brethren movement. Even those who do not follow dispensational thought completely are affected by the kind of attitude toward the Old Testament which characterizes it (as well as some other approaches). Thus a good deal of the doxology of the Old Testament, including vocabulary of worship (e.g., in the Psalms and Chronicles), the use of musical instruments, and physical expressions of spiritual joy are missing from much brethren worship. This is also related to a particular understanding of John 4:23, 24.

5. Certain Christian thinkers, notably Origen (who lived approximately 185 to 254), attempted to preserve the Old Testament for Christians by assigning not only a literal meaning but also an allegorical meaning to the text. This was not totally different from what was done by some Greek thinkers after belief in the Olympian gods began to disintegrate and the Homeric

theology was hard to maintain. This comparison is not meant to minimize Origen's work, but to show that such an approach to religious literature prior to one's own time and outlook is not uniquely Christian. As a matter of fact, a characteristic both of neo-orthodox theology and of the 'demythologizing' of the New Testament critical scholar, Rudolf Bultmann, has been an attempt to salvage spiritual meaning from the Scriptures without being tied to issues of their historicity or of the miraculous element in Scripture. It is paradoxical that many Christians who would recoil from the excesses of neo-orthodoxy and of Bultmannianism have in effect done something rather similar. The tendency to 'spiritualize' Scripture, ignoring the historical context, can in effect make it of little matter whether there is an historical foundation or not.

6. Another attempt to find significance in the Old Testament is through typology. This approach has been in and out of favour in

[p.86]

recent years. It is a valid approach when properly followed. However, some of the popular brethren writings, both early and recent, give the impression that the value of the Old Testament is realized mainly, if not only, to the extent that it can be shown to prefigure Christ in typology. There are two possible hazards in this regard. One is to impose on a passage in the Old Testament a significance which God himself did not give it. There has been much debate as to whether it is legitimate to call any person, event, or thing in the Old Testament a type if it has not been so designated (either explicitly or implicitly) in the New Testament. The other hazard is equally serious. It is that by typologizing a passage we may well bypass its contextual significance. To give a practical example, one sometimes hears sermons on Joseph which present him as a type of Christ. Generally absent from these sermons is a balanced presentation of the providence of God in Joseph's life, of the significance of the events in the ongoing history of Israel, and (apart from simple moralizing) of the response of Joseph personally to the changing circumstances which helped him mature in his faith.

7. For some time it has been common to explain the relationship between the Old and New Testament in terms of the service performed by the Old Testament in preparing the way for Christ. (This 'preparatory' view overlaps several of the other approaches mentioned here.) Such a perspective is certainly true and to be found in the New Testament. A problem does exist, however, when this viewpoint includes the assumption that the Old Testament is inferior to the New because it is only a forerunner to the fuller revelation. We must be careful not to confuse function with value. The Old Testament is as fully the Word of God as is the New. The affirmation, 'All Scripture is inspired to God and is profitable...', refers to the Old Testament.

8. The term, '*salvation history*', has been popular for several decades now. There have been various understandings of this, but for our purposes we may think of it as the work of God through history, stage by stage, among his people in both Old and New Testament times. In a sense, this is a corollary to the idea of progressive revelation. This approach is sometimes thought to have less value because it deals with history rather than doctrine, but to some extent the one does involve the other.

9. The Reformed Churches hold to the concept of 'covenant theology' as a way of seeing the unity of the two Testaments. The so-called covenant of grace, which God made with Christ and with mankind is seen to extend back into Old Testament times. Believers were saved then

by grace as they are now. The present covenant is a 'better' one just as the ministry of Jesus is better than that of Moses (Heb. 8:6).

[p.87]

10. The concept of *promise and fulfilment*, or simply of promise, is offered as a central theme connecting the Testaments. This differs from covenant theology and from dispensationalism, as well as from the idea of mere 'preparation', though it is compatible with them. The continuing theme of promise is affirmed by New Testament statements on fulfilment, even by a continuing use of the term, promise, itself (e.g., regarding the Holy Spirit, Luke 24:49; Acts 2:16-29; Gal. 3:14; David's Son, Acts 13:22, 23; and the resurrection of Christ, Acts 26:6-8).

These do not exhaust the attempts to resolve the issue. They will be sufficient, though, to show the diversity of approaches. The reasons for such a diversity are clear. There are elements both of continuity and of discontinuity between the two Testaments. The New Testament is consciously an extension of the Old, and its interpreter. This implies continuity. At the same time the coming of Christ brought a new situation which implies discontinuity. How far-reaching is this difference? The difficulty in deciding is best seen by selecting several aspects of New Testament theology which illustrate a theological unity between the Testaments at the same time that there is a radical break.

### **EXAMPLES OF UNITY AND DIVERSITY**

1. The people of God. This is a great theme in Scripture. It also constitutes a major issue between covenant theology and dispensationalism. To the dispensationalist, the church is a new creation of God. To the covenant theologian, there is one people of God. The dispensationalist would emphasize the newness of the 'mystery' of the church in Ephesians 3:4-6. The covenant theologian would observe that the words, '...was not made known... in other generations as it has now been revealed...' imply that at least some revelation was given on the subject in Old Testament times. Should the church understand itself to be the 'Israel of God' (Gal. 6:16)? The term probably refers rather to 'those within Israel to whom God will show mercy' (Richardson, *Israel in the Apostolic Church*, p.82). Paul's words, 'For they are not all Israel, which are of Israel' (Rom. 9:6), have sometimes been taken to mean that there are Israelites spiritually (i.e. the church) who are not Israelites physically. This would be contrary to the context in Romans 9 to 11. Perhaps the best translation is the NIV, 'For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel'. Paul seems to distinguish clearly between the historical people of Israel and the church. This is not to the detriment of the former. Indeed the Gospel is 'to the Jew first'.

[p.88]

The figure of the olive tree in Romans 11:11-24 carries the message that the Gentiles are 'unnatural branches' and that the tree itself, Israel, continues to stand ready to flourish again. There is therefore an aspect of discontinuity between Israel and the largely Gentile church. At the same time, the church has inherited many of the blessings of spiritual Israel. This is clear from 1 Peter 2:9, 'You are a holy priesthood...' and from the fact that Christian believers look back to Abraham as the father of their faith.

This aspect of continuity is especially characteristic of Luke-Acts. At every point in his history, Luke is trying to connect Christianity with its Jewish roots. This is apparent from the very beginning of his Gospel, when, using a semitic style, he begins his story in the very centre of Jewish religion, the temple. Luke refers frequently to the city of Jerusalem as the place of Jesus' destiny, the city which is lamented because of its rejection of its own Messiah, and the city from which the Gospel proceeds to the whole world. Luke carefully distinguishes between the 'crowds', who are neutral or even hostile toward Jesus, the Jewish leaders (such as the chief priests, Pharisees, etc.), and the 'people' (*laos*), those who are true believers or potentially such. While the term 'people' refers, naturally, only to Jewish people in his Gospel and in most of Acts, the term also refers to Gentile believers in Acts 15:14 and, by implication, in 18:10.

This has been a sketchy treatment of this particular issue, but perhaps enough has been observed to show both an element of continuity and one of discontinuity with regard to the people of God. It seems right, therefore, both to distinguish between Israel and the church and to understand ourselves in substantial continuity with God's people in Old Testament times.

2. *The Covenants*. This is such a vast and detailed topic, that even to begin to discuss it is to hazard superficiality and obscurity. Each of the passages referring to the idea of a covenant should be studied individually. And such study does not always yield to a simple dialectical approach; some texts do not neatly fit one system or another. W. C. Kaiser's emphasis on the 'promise' can be seen as a middle way between covenant theology and dispensationalism. T. E. McComiskey (in a forthcoming work) deals with promise as distinct from covenant and as a unifying theme between the Testaments. McComiskey treats covenant both in a formal sense and as the expression of a promise which continues even though the formal aspect of the covenant may be altered. (We inherit the promise of Abraham, but the covenantal element of circumcision has been terminated.) An approach of this sort can help us to hold on to important elements of continuity while yet acknowledging a certain discontinuity as God's covenants change age

[p.89]

by age. The term, 'new covenant', occurs in Jeremiah 31:31-34 (where it carries with it the inward power to obey) and in Luke 22:20. Jesus established a new covenant in his blood when he instituted the Lord's Supper. It is striking to find the statement, 'and I confer on you a kingdom' in the same context of the Supper (v.29). The verb, 'confer' (*diatithemi*), sounds like covenant terminology. One forceful statement about God's covenant in Luke 1:68-79 is usually overlooked. The song of Zachariah contains a series of significant terms which are then repeated in reverse order (i.e., in a chiasmic structure). These include 'come', 'people', 'salvation', 'prophet(s)' and the 'hand' of the 'enemies'. The pivotal terminology at the middle of the chiasm, i.e., last of the first series and first of the second (reversed) series, is 'covenant... oath' (vv.72, 73). The literary structure thus focuses attention on the central element of the covenant or oath of God which continues in force through the two Testaments.

Naturally the book of Hebrews provides insight on the covenant. 'Jesus has become the guarantee of a better covenant' (Heb. 7:22). Consistent with the whole thrust of Hebrews, the 'better' aspect of the covenant is Jesus himself. This does not denigrate the Old Testament any more than Hebrews 1:1-3 does.

3. *The Law*. It is clear that the Lord Jesus, while challenging the oral law of the Pharisees, never violated any of the commands of the Mosaic law. Not only was his life morally pure, but he observed the external provisions of the Law (e.g., payment of the temple tax) as well. From time to time in Jesus' ministry he cited the Old Testament. In the Sermon on the Mount, as mentioned earlier, he said that he did not come to destroy but to fulfil the Law (Matt. 5:17). This statement has received a variety of interpretations. It has been understood to mean that Jesus obeyed the Law, that he affirmed it, that he gave it a new interpretation as Messiah, or that he fulfilled the Old Testament Law in the same sense that he fulfilled prophecy, among other interpretations. How do we understand the 'antitheses' which follow in Matthew 5:21-48? Was Jesus abrogating the Old Testament Law? This cannot be sustained from the text. Did he 'radicalize' it, bring such new force that, at least in some cases, the original meaning is left far behind? Did he merely explain the Law, bringing out its inner meaning or perhaps extending it? Did he treat the different laws in different ways in the antitheses? Was he dealing not with the Law, but only with the Pharisaic interpretation of it?

One thing must be made clear: however we may understand the antitheses, Jesus opposed any attempt to break or annul the Old Testament Law (Matt. 23:23; Mark 7:8-13; cf. John 10:35, 'the Scripture cannot be broken'). To 'fulfil' the Law is the opposite of annulling it.

[p.90]

There can be no question but that Jesus upheld the Law as such. However, he did not insist on detailed observance of every provision in the Law, when the circumstances for which that provision was intended had been changed. Jesus' teaching in the Sabbath controversies (Mark 2:23-3:6) does not set such principles as the love command and regard for human need over against the biblical Law of the Sabbath, for these considerations were already contained in the Law. Jesus may have deliberately healed on the Sabbath when he could have waited in a non-emergency situation, partly to assert his own authority and partly to illustrate that his coming brought a new 'Sabbath'. (Cf. his sermon in the synagogue at Galilee, which clearly links his ministry with the Jubilee year, Luke 4:19.) Far from seeing his own ethical demands as contradicting the Law, Jesus said that the Law and the Prophets 'hang' or 'depend' on the love command (to love God and neighbour; Matt. 22:40).

Paul's strong statements about the Law, e.g., Romans 6:14; 10:4; Galatians 3:19, 24, 25, certainly show discontinuity with the Old Testament economy. At the same time Paul is concerned to vindicate the Law (Rom. 7:7, 12) as good and holy. He conceives the Law as being fulfilled through the love command (Rom. 13:10), much as Jeremiah saw it as the Law being written on the heart (31:31-34). We do not follow the specific rules of the Old Testament Law, but rather the 'law of the Spirit of life' (Rom. 5:2), the 'law of Christ' (Gal. 6:2). For Paul the specific code of the Law was a thing of the past. It was 'added' and was in effect 'until' the promised one came. It led those under its charge to him (Gal. 3:19, 24). If Jesus said that he came to 'fulfil' the Law, so Paul could say that Christ was the 'end' (*telos*, which also means 'goal') of the law (Rom. 10:4).

This is a vast and complex subject, but once again perhaps enough has been said to show how our understanding of the role of the Law in the New Testament is a factor in our understanding of the relationship of the two Testaments. It is not possible here to discuss such crucial texts as Romans 10:5 ('The man who does these things will live by them') dealing with the function of the Law within the Old Testament itself. What we have seen now from our three examples is that with respect to the people of God, the covenants and the Law, we

must understand the present nature and continuing importance of each, while at the same time affirming the change brought by the coming of Christ.

## UNIFYING THEMES

One way to appreciate the unity and continuity which does exist

[p.91]

between the two Testaments is to study those themes which are prominent in both. Before looking at two of these, the kingdom and the servant Messiah, we should consider two facts so obvious that they are likely to be taken for granted.

One is that the God of the Old Testament is also the God of the New Testament. To be sure, even this has been disputed by as diverse figures as Marcion, mentioned above, and some twentieth century thinkers. Yet it should be clear that the God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ is the same God who created man and woman, who established marriage, and who redeemed Israel through the Exodus, foreshadowing the redemption of believers through Christ. The Lord Jesus' concept of God as Father contained a truth not characteristic of the Old Testament, but yet not negating any Old Testament teaching about God.

The second fact is that both Testaments are the revealed Word of God. The past decades have seen an emphasis on the personal revelation of God with, in some quarters, a de-emphasis on 'propositional revelation' (objective statements). The former is commendable; the latter is to be lamented. The effect of denigrating the idea of propositional revelation was, from one theological viewpoint, to free the Bible from allegedly embarrassing statements about science, history, geography and even some standards of morality in the Old Testament which Christians find hard to explain. We must squarely face the fact that belief in propositional revelation does commit one to upholding certain statements in the Scriptures which are difficult to understand. It makes the task of presenting the two Testaments as a unified whole more difficult. Nevertheless the burden must be assumed. God's Word is truth, in both Old and New Testaments, and this fact finds the two together, difficulties notwithstanding.

*The Kingdom of God* is a great theme which characterizes both Testaments. It is true that dispensationalists have tended (with differences in detail) to see the kingdom as significant in the Gospels only until it is rejected by the Jews. After the Gospels (and here they are unquestionably right) there is very little mention of the kingdom. To be sure, all believers have been rescued from the power of darkness and brought into the kingdom of God's dear son (Col. 1:13). Dispensationalists will see different meanings for the word, 'kingdom', and will want to distinguish carefully the 'Davidic kingdom'. Certain key verses (e.g., Matt. 21:43) need careful consideration, impossible in this brief article. The fact that I want to emphasize here, however, is the truth that God is seen as King in both Old and New Testaments, and that the kingdom of God as a prominent place in the New Testament. Again and again in the Old Testament, poets and prophets alike look

[p.92]

forward to the time when God's name will be known throughout the earth. He will be recognized as the true God who comes to the aid of his people, and Gentiles eventually will come to him in truth.

The theme of the exaltation of the name of God through his victorious kingdom is characteristic not only of the Old Testament but of the Lord's Prayer: 'Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven...' The book of Revelation foresees the ultimate victory of God and the vindication of his name. The song of Moses and of the Lamb in Revelation 15:3-4 honours God as 'King of the ages' and says that all 'will bring glory to your name', and 'all nations will come and worship before you'. 'Hallelujah! For our Lord God Almighty reigns' (19:6). The triumphant writer whose name is the Word of God is identified as 'King of Kings and Lord of Lords' (Rev. 19:11-16). Whatever distinctions may be legitimately made between different kingdoms, or different phases of one kingdom, the fact of God's kingdom and the glorification of his name through the kingdom is an unifying theme in both Testaments.

Christ is the great theme of both Testaments. This has been the Christian affirmation since resurrection day, when Jesus 'explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself' (Luke 24:27). The emphasis in this chapter of Luke on the blindness of the disciples giving way to belief is extremely important. Their eyes were 'opened' (v.31), Christ 'opened' the Scriptures (v.32), and he 'opened' their minds (v.45). Note the emphasis on the Scriptures here. It was when the risen Christ opened the Scriptures that their hearts 'burned' within them (v.32). We may assume that the church's later explanation of Christ as the Messiah, whose death had to precede his glory, derived initially from Jesus' teaching in the period following his resurrection. This was not completely new, for he had previously said concerning the Old Testament that these are the Scriptures 'that testify about me' (John 5:39). The idea of 'testimony' or 'witness' is important in the Gospel of John. If Jesus had not been on solid ground (and John likewise as he related this) it would have been futile to appeal to the Old Testament support of his claims.

It is unfortunate that so much of the preaching one hears stretches the Old Testament Scriptures to try to find Christ on every page. This is done no doubt devoutly, in a sincere desire to honour the Lord Jesus. Others have done it in a desperate attempt to find some value in the Old Testament for Christian use. Not only does this result, as observed earlier, in passing over the important message of certain passages, but it may displace the exposition of those Old Testament passages which do indeed speak of Christ. He is the 'prophet like Moses'

[p.93]

(Dent. 18:15; the term, prophet, being a more significant appellation of Jesus than some realize). He is the suffering servant of Isaiah 42:1-7; 49:1-7; 50:4-9; 52:13-53:12. He is the 'passover, sacrificed for us' (1 Cor. 5:7), the 'bread from heaven' (John 6:32-35), our 'great high priest' (Heb. 2:17; 4:14-16), and the 'Lamb of God' (John 1:29). Although the New Testament writers occasionally used a methodology of interpreting the Old Testament Scriptures which is somewhat strange to us today, they approached the Old Testament with a reverence and concern for its meaning in context. The very fact that they quoted, alluded to, and constantly employed the vocabulary of the Old Testament shows how important the Old Testament was to them. We need not engage in typological speculation on the one hand or in a distortion of Old Testament passages on the other to find Christ throughout the ancient texts.



There is a diversity of contexts, a diversity of concepts and a diversity of applications of the Old Testament texts in the New Testament. Nevertheless there is a unity around the person of Christ. There is one God and Father and there is one eternal Son, the Servant Messiah. His coming and that of the Holy Spirit were promised in the Old Testament. The true people of God, both the Jewish 'remnant' and the largely Gentile church welcomed the fulfilment of God's promise. The Law and the Prophets were fulfilled. God remembered his oath and gave us a better covenant through the One who was his final Word.

This article has been written with considerable concern. The distillation of such a large subject into a brief article opens the possibility of omissions, distortions, obscurities, and superficiality. As a guide to further study I am providing a bibliography in three categories. The first is of works which address themselves mainly to the relationship between the two Testaments. The second group is of books which deal with the Old Testament primarily but contain some significant observations on the relationship of the Testaments. The third contains works primarily on the New Testament, but which contain some useful comments on the issues with which we are here concerned. Selection has been on the basis of significance and usefulness rather than of agreement. The bibliography is not exhaustive, but is simply a list of some of the works which I have had opportunity to use. I have not included any which are not available in English, nor any of the journal articles which have also made a contribution from time to time.

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Prepared for the Web in December 2007 by Robert I. Bradshaw.

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