

The Bible Jesus Read

We need the Old Testament to understand the mission of God and the identity of the church.

BY DONALD E. BURKE



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Many Christians are uncertain about what to make of the Old Testament. It is frequently difficult to understand. Some of the stories offend our sensitivities. Some of the legal material is far removed from our circumstances in the 21st century. And Christians have the New Testament to guide them. Wouldn't it just be simpler to ignore the Old Testament, or to unhitch it from Christianity entirely?

In the previous article, we discussed two of the most common objections

raised against the Old Testament and discovered that they are based on misrepresentations. In this article, we will explore several reasons for the continued inclusion of the Old Testament in the canon of Scripture.

For the early church and the writers of the New Testament, the Old Testament was the only Scripture they had.

It is important for us to remember that the first Christians and the early church

lived with the Old Testament as their only Scriptures. They obviously believed that the Old Testament, far from being outdated or superseded by the events of Jesus's life, death and Resurrection, were, in fact, essential for Christian faith and practice. We can see this in several ways.

First, the earliest church turned to the Old Testament to understand the character of God. They did not believe they were worshipping a God revealed in Jesus Christ who was different to the God revealed in the Old Testament. Instead, they understood that the God of Israel was also the God and Father of Jesus Christ—that Jesus was this God's Son. They recognized an underlying continuity between the Old Testament and what they had come to believe and experience through Jesus.

Second, New Testament writers continually referred to the Old Testament to interpret the significance of Jesus. The Gospel of Matthew is especially relevant here. Over and over again, Matthew connects events in the life of Jesus with texts from the Old Testament prophets. Matthew sees a continuity in the work of God in the world, from the Old Testament through the life of Jesus and to the life of the early church. In addition, Paul's letters only make sense when we acknowledge their indebtedness to the Old Testament as the Scriptures of Israel and the church. For example, one of Paul's most compelling arguments was that the way to salvation through faith was consistent from the time of Abraham onward (see Romans 4). Paul maintained that the gospel rests upon the foundation of the Old Testament.

Third, in the thinking of the earliest church, there was a fundamental continuity between the Israel of the Old Testament and the church of the New Testament. Christians could describe themselves as a "new Israel" or a "renewed Israel" (see 1 Peter 2:9-10). The importance of this conviction is not that Israel and its Scriptures were somehow dispensable or superseded, but rather that there was a continuity of mission and purpose from Israel to the church. The church can live out its mission and identity only when it is formed fully by this knowledge. The Old Testament provides the clearest witness to this mission and identity.

Without the Old Testament, our understanding of the mission of God in the world is partial and impoverished.

Without the Old Testament, we are left with only a partial understanding—and perhaps even a misunderstanding—of the mission of God for the salvation of the world. The wisdom of the church, in its decision to hold the Old and New Testaments together as sacred Scripture, is seen in the fact that the breadth and depth of the mission of God is revealed in the structure of the canon of Christian Scripture in its entirety.

This is evident in the opening chapters of Genesis, which begin with the glorious descriptions of a world created by a generous and gracious Creator; continues through the degradation of creation and humanity through human sinfulness; recounts the first efforts by God to forge a faithful human community through the call of Abraham and Sarah and the subsequent history of Israel; reached its climax in the life, death and Resurrection of Jesus; continues in the mission of the church in the world; and concludes with the vision of God's creation of a new heaven and a new earth (see Revelation 21).

The Christian Scriptures—Old and New Testaments together—reveal the grand mission of God in the world, from creation to new creation. Without the Old Testament in its full and proper place within the Christian canon, we lose sight of the expansive mission of God to save all of creation. Christianity itself is truncated and vulnerable to an other-worldly obsession that loses sight of the incarnational nature of our faith. Far from being irrelevant for Christian faith, the Old Testament provides the essential foundation for understanding the breadth of the work of God through Jesus Christ.

The Old Testament provides a powerful antidote to the Christian tendency to focus on individual salvation alone.

In the Old Testament, God calls Israel to be a people who live in ways that are distinct from the dominant cultures around it. That is, Israel was to be the people of God as a witness to the world, to demonstrate the good news of God's enduring efforts to embrace the world

and return it to its first harmony. The promises made to Abraham and Sarah in Genesis 12 included the promise that through them, all the families of the earth would be blessed (see Genesis 12:3). The emphasis in the Old Testament is upon Israel as a people—as a faithful human community—with a mission to all of humanity and all of creation. The church inherits that expansive mission (see Matthew 28:19-20).

If we read only the New Testament, we frequently fall into the trap of thinking that God's work in the world is primarily—if not exclusively—for the salvation of individual souls. This emphasis on individual salvation can reinforce a rabid individualism that values only the work of God in individual lives and that views salvation as focused on saving individual souls.

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The wisdom that comes with hearing the full witness of the Scriptures is that it balances concern for the salvation of individual humans with the need to recognize that just as sin is both individual and social, so, too, God's salvation also reaches beyond individual souls to transform communities. God's mission in the world moves beyond individuals to create a faithful human community. The Old Testament provides a primary witness to this.

Without the Old Testament, we would easily lose sight of the tragedy, cruelty and consequences of injustice, as well as God's desire for all of creation to flourish through justice.

The Old Testament—especially in the prophets—provides an incisive analysis of the sources and consequences of injustice, as economic, social and political oppression strip whole populations of the basic necessities for a flourishing

human life. They remind us that human communities in which such injustice runs rampant are doomed to destruction. The prophets utter a clarion call to commit ourselves to the pursuit of justice, with the goal of establishing communities in which human flourishing in its fullest sense is cultivated. With the Old Testament in the canon of Scripture, we hear this call as a Christian responsibility.

In addition, we learn from the Book of Deuteronomy that an alternative is possible to a debt-based, dehumanizing economic system that strips people of their dignity and consigns vast numbers to the scrapheap of below-the-poverty-line employment. We also learn that provision for the contemporary equivalents of ancient Israel's "widow, orphan and resident alien" is foundational to the kind of community the church is called to be.

In other words, the entire canon of the Christian Scriptures, considered in its entirety without neglecting any of its parts, provides us with a more complete vision of the mission and identity of the church in the world. When we truncate the canon, we distort our mission and impoverish our experience of God and the salvation that Jesus came to bring to the world.

The Old Testament does present challenges as we try to read it in the 21st century. But the prospect of "unhitching" Christianity from the Old Testament, either through neglect or through its intentional removal from the Christian Bible, endangers our ability to hear the full witness of God's Word to the church and to understand the full mission of the church. That is a price too high to pay. ☞

Dr. Donald E. Burke is the interim president of The Salvation Army's Booth University College in Winnipeg.