Scrapping the Old Testament

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Let's be honest, the Old Testament can be downright confusing at the best of times, and just plain weird and wild at other times, because much of what we read is so far removed from 21st Century life.

Therefore many Christians rather stick to the safety of the New Testament, and perhaps Psalms and Proverbs. Yet the Old Testament is vital to our faith as Christians. To properly understand Jesus and the church, we need to understand the Old (or first) Testament.

A Quick Old Testament Overview

– The Old Testament was written over a time period of approximately 1,000 years

– It is made up of a 'library' of 39 books

– It includes all manner of types of literature, including narrative, poetry, wisdom sayings etc.

– It is written by a number of different authors

– More than a library, the Old Testament is history of a real people and nation in real life situations, with a very real beginning, heading towards a very real end.

Tips for Reading The Old Testament

Here are some points that have assisted me as I have grown in my reading and teaching of the Old Testament over the years.

1. Always Remember the Bigger Picture

The Bible has four parts or chapters to it. Creation, Fall, Redemption and Consummation. Three of the four parts are found in the Old Testament. Therefore the Old Testament has to be read and understood within this bigger picture.

Creation

This is described in Genesis by the God who makes all things out of nothing. He is the creator and great designer of life. He put man on the earth with the mandate to care for it and rule it.

Fall

This is a long and dark part. It is a dark thread which runs through the Old Testament, almost to the end of the Bible (Revelation 22:11, 15). The beginning of it is described in Genesis 3, detailing how man and woman chose to rebel against God. The result was a tragic fall, a loss of the divine favour and presence of God, and the introduction of sin. The result is that man came under God's wrath. God cursed the earth and the labour of people. This ongoing desire for independence and resistance to God runs throughout the Old Testament and into the new.

Redemption

This is the most prominent part in the Old Testament and culminates in the New Testament with Jesus. Although God is holy and just, He is also a God of mercy and love. So God initiates a rescue mission to reconcile and bring fallen and rebellious humankind back into right relationship with Him, culminating in the person and work of Jesus.

Consummation

This is the final chapter of God's story where God completes His redemptive plan – firstly, through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Secondly, through the ongoing work of Jesus through the church in the world, all in anticipation of the final judgement and the renewal of all

creation. It is to this point that all of the Old Testament leads.

2. Watch Out for Extremes

Some people have rejected the Old Testament. An example from church history in the 2nd Century is a man named Marcion who taught that the God of the Old and New Testaments were different, and therefore the Old Testament is not relevant for Christians. Beware of some who are like modern-day Marcionites who teach that the God of the Old Testament is different from the New Testament.

We also reject the Old Testament in our practice by only reading what we are comfortable with and ignoring the rest. Or else we read the Old Testament as separate from the New Testament and not connected at all to the same story woven throughout the Bible.

The other extreme are those who glorify the Old Testament. There is a popular trend among some people to focus primarily on the Old Testament. They try to follow aspects of the Mosaic Law, celebrate some of the festivals, keep the Sabbath, learn to play the Shofar and some even get circumcised, as if this will somehow make them more spiritual. Paul makes it clear in the New Testament that we mustn't do this (Galatians 2:3,4, Galatians 4:9,10, Colossians 2:16,17). We are no longer under law but under grace (Romans 6:14). We are now under the New Covenant, the law of Christ (Galatians 6:2).

3. Get to Grips with The Covenants and The Law

Why did God give the Law as an expression of His covenant with His people? It was given to God's chosen people (at that time Israel were this chosen nation) to help establish a right relationship with Him, the nations around them, and one another.

The entire Law can essentially be summed up as this: love God and love people (Mark 12:28-34). The Ten Commandments reveal this. The first four deal with the God-ward aspect of loving and obeying Him. (Exodus 20:1-11). The second six deal with the horizontal aspects of loving and respecting people. (Exodus 20:12-17).

'Here were a people who knew only slavery and Egyptian culture for centuries, whom God was now about to reconstitute into a totally new people on the face of the earth. Not only must they be formed into an army of warriors, but they must also be formed into a community that would be able to live together… At the same time the Law set boundaries with regard to their relationships with the cultures around them' (Gordon Fee)

It is helpful to distinguish between three categories of Old Testament Law, two of which no longer directly apply to Christian's daily lives now, and one of which does. Those three categories are:

1. **Civil laws** – Shaped the daily life of Israel at that time. (e.g. Exodus 21:1-36)
2. **Ceremonial/Ritual laws** – Dealt with the worshipping life of Israel. (e.g. Leviticus 1:1-13)
3. **Moral/Ethical laws** – The moral law encompasses regulations on justice, respect and sexual conduct, and includes the Ten Commandments. Many of the ethical or moral laws found in the Old Testament are still applicable for us today. These have been restated by Jesus and the New Testament writers (see Matthew 5:21- 27) as the 'law of Christ' (Galatians 6:2).

When I read the Old Testament in this sort of way, it becomes far less threatening. Not only does it just make more sense, but the incredible redeeming love of God is revealed in the uniqueness of the history of Israel and the complexity of living for God in a fallen world. I would encourage you to read the whole word of God as it has been given, in both Testaments, and trust the Holy Spirit to reveal the nature of God and the beauty of His salvation as it has been unfolding since creation. Happy reading and learning!